

EVERGREN

CASSANDRA ZURAWSKI

Evergren

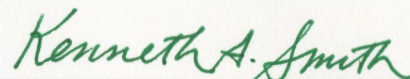
Cassandra Zurawski

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree  
Master of Arts in English  
in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
Indiana University

May 2007

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts in English.

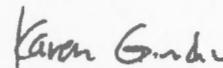
I would like to thank Dr. Kenneth Smith for his direction in the writing of this report.  
I would also like to thank Dr. Karen Gindele and Dr. Joseph Chaney for providing additional  
insight.



Kenneth Smith, Ph.D.

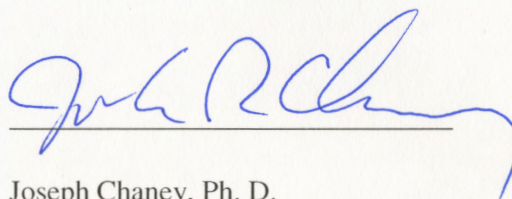
Director

MA Committee



Karen Gindele, Ph.D.

May 9, 2007



Joseph Chaney, Ph. D.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Kenneth Smith for his dedication to the ripening of this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Karen Gindele and Dr. Joseph Chaney for providing additional insight.



## Table of Contents

“Examining the Choices of Craft and Genre”.....	1
<u>Evergren</u> .....	17



Writing the novella Evergren presented me with innumerable decisions about dialog, characters, genre, plot, and other aspects of craft. Editing my work in order to polish its rough edges and sharpen its focus required me to see the work in a different light. The more I am able to analyze my current editing process, the better I will be able to make writing and editing decisions for future projects. Intensive editing has given me the opportunity to reflect upon the many choices I made with the novella. This essay explores many of my decisions, and I include passages from several drafts that exemplify my progress. Examples from published works of fiction by different authors serve to further illustrate lessons about dialog tags, repetition, and character description. I will analyze the novella's over-arching concerns with genre and theme in addition to smaller, more localized components in which genre also plays a role. On a large scale, choices about genre serve as the work's foundation while several less obvious points of craft strengthen its entire structure.

Evergren's foundation is spread across three fiction genres: mainstream, fantasy, and mystery. I begin the tale in the familiar settings of mainstream fiction so that the rest of the story can grow in mysterious, unknown realms. I wanted to play with the idea that mainstream fiction, in seeking to mirror reality, contains both the mundane and the intriguing. In the beginning, Margot draws the reader's eye to what is boring, and in the end, she learns to see the magical amidst the everyday act of cleaning her grandmother's house. I chose fantasy as the next genre because it, too, presents a variety of possibilities. Fantasy allows for the creation of the exotic, the unique, and the grand. At no economic cost and with very little travel time, Margot can escape the expectations of her mainstream life and step into a foreign world. I enjoyed working in the mystery genre because it explores Margot's intellect where the other genres focus on her emotions and physical actions. Solving a mystery allows Margot to emerge as smart as well as caring and brave. After I determined the genres Evergren would incorporate, I examined their pre-existing conventions and themes to see which common genre traits I wanted to incorporate into the novella. The genre themes provided a framework, a group of focused questions for

which I worked to provide original answers. I knew that I did not want to write fiction too similar to what is already available, and I found plenty of room within established genres to bend the rules.

H. Thomas Milhorn addresses mainstream fiction as belonging to what he calls the “literary genre” in his book Writing Genre Fiction: A Guide to the Craft. The stories in this category are “usually considered to be more concerned with style and solid writing, to stress character development and good descriptions, and to be paced more slowly than genre fiction” (2). Mainstream fiction is also known for highlighting a protagonist’s family relations and friendships. Mainstream fiction appeals to readers by following the main character along a story arc that demonstrates maturation as a result of learning from a series of tribulations. The genre also maintains popularity because each story represents, closely or metaphorically, a cross-section of the human experience; mainstream plays out scenarios about single parents, long friendships, and countless other situations. I wanted Evergren to deviate from the common theme of a female protagonist’s dysfunctional relationship with her mother. Margot feels disconnected from her mother, but I placed greater significance on Margot’s relationship with her grandmother. Margot’s relationship with Grandma Marshall receives more attention and undergoes the biggest change. My aim was to open the story up to be about much more than a generational gap. The absences of Margot’s father and grandfather leave room in her life for male influences. Margot seems to regret not knowing her kind, adventurous grandfather at the same time she wants to forget the pain inflicted by her father’s conscious abandonment. One reason Margot becomes enamored with Evergren is that characters such as Jaden, Sage, and Razuhl represent perseverance, loyalty, and responsibility, traits her father lacked. Margot’s friendships before her introduction to Evergren are based on casual, humorous conversations about what she, Todd, and Darin share in common: college classes, aimless boredom, and keeping Evergren a secret from their parents. As in her family relationships, Margot keeps her friends at a slight distance while caring a good deal about them. Margot’s warmth toward Todd continues past his death, but her



relationship with Darin cannot survive the same tragedy. His decision not to return to Evergren draws attention to Margot's development as a strong, courageous protagonist. From the first pages, readers should be aware that Margot is looking for something that does not currently exist in her life. Despite the inclusion of other genres, the main plot maintains focus on Margot's development, her relationships, and the effects of her adventures on her everyday life; in this way, the story remains a mainstream work throughout. The novella might have continued at the slow, mainstream pace in which it opens if I did not introduce fantasy elements that spark Margot's interest and introduce her to a more active life.

Fantasy, according to Milhorn, is "any story of the impossible—a tale that has events that could never happen in the real world" (21). Fantasy includes "magic and unnatural beings," people who can do things like "cast spells or travel to parallel universes, while other people cannot," and "a prize to be won" at the end of the quest (21). The inclusion of mythological humanoids helps separate the fantasy world from the protagonist's and reader's world. Fantasy fiction holds multiple appeals. Fantasy worlds often involve forests, mountains, and oceans, which not all readers get to witness for themselves. The genre supplies readers with strange customs that serve as the backdrop for an inexpensive vacation of the imagination, quite often alongside socio-political commentary that engages intellectual discussion. Fantasy requires an extent of realism; the genre is guided by sets of writer-created laws that must be as logical as they are interesting. I employ mythological humanoids, guards who are part crocodile, part human, as one of Margot's first clues that she is no longer in the United States. The four mythological creatures that Margot encounters are not original to the novella but are portrayed in a new way. I give personality and social roles to satyrs, crocodile-headed men, tigresses, and people who are part falcon. Magic is not used as prominently as it is in other fantasy texts; I want to keep the story centered on Margot's experience and character development, not detract from it by having to explain or describe too many magical elements. The novella employs magic when necessary to the plot: to create portals, to cause Todd's death, to capture his lost soul, and to keep Tarinok

from fighting during the climactic palace scene. Legends are another part of the fantasy genre, and I include a few with two purposes. The legends of Kamen and the Accursed first act to help draw Margot further into her affection for Evergren. Later, the information proves useful to Margot in understanding the circumstances surrounding Todd's death and whom she might consult about finding his soul. Part of the fantasy-based portion of the novella is the question of who receives the opportunity to travel through the portals and who does not. As someone who learns the magical phrases, Margot can control who she invites. The novella's twist on the fantasy quest is that Margot's quest is only prompted by the introduction of conventions from the mystery genre. Margot does not search for the Betrayer's identity so that she can earn a prize or material reward. Margot's quest is not limited to Evergren but takes place in the United States as well. Both worlds supply her with the clues she needs. This validates and places value on both worlds, for the reader and for Margot, helping to advance her development as a character. The introduction of fantasy in the novella allows Margot the escape she craves from everyday life. Despite her discouraging experience in Jazhara's dungeon, the more welcoming elements available in fantasy lull Margot into a sense of security. However, for the sake of the tale at large, Margot cannot remain happy and dormant; she must be roused to take action and mature as a person. Although fantasy allows for this to happen, I chose to draw Margot into yet another genre, mystery. Only something as heart-wrenching as a friend's death is going to wrest Margot from the comfort of the swamps, and in order for her to continue her journey toward becoming a whole, mature person, she must be roused to committing to the people she cares about. Mystery also lets Margot discover how thrilling research can be when it is about a subject of intrigue rather than an assigned topic.

Milhorn breaks the mystery genre into four sub-genres, including that of the amateur detective, which most closely describes the third stage of the novella. In this kind of mystery, "the action tend[s] to center on the attempts of the wily amateur detective to solve the crime" (26). While this is happening, "the reader remains as puzzled as the characters within the story,"

and the “identity of the antagonist usually is not known until the climax of the story” (26). In the style of Nancy Drew, Margot becomes an active researcher not willing to fail. Todd’s murder is not simply a puzzle for Margot to solve. The novella’s crime victim is someone close to the sleuth, adding extra incentive for Margot to solve the crime. Todd’s death draws her in and keeps the novella moving. Unlike most mystery fiction, her search is not for the murderer (the magician who actually killed Todd) but for the person who intentionally placed him in harm’s way.

Margot’s resolution as the sleuth is precipitated by finishing her fantasy quest. Only then does she learn that Tyler, as High Mage Tarinok, has worked with Queen Jazhara and endangered Todd. Margot’s mystery turns out to be part of a conspiracy that spans both worlds.

Incorporating elements of the mystery genre allows me to do two things for the novella. Mystery gives me a way to conclude the story, bringing justice to those responsible for Todd’s death and helping Margot to see her life differently. Adding a third genre also provides the opportunity to add interest to the quest so common to the fantasy genre. Most quests are presented as requiring the protagonist to travel from one place to another, facing challenges along the way. Margot’s quest is not as straightforward; she does not know where she will end up. Mystery allows Margot’s character to receive the additional layer of sleuth, and she is able to showcase her loyalty to Todd as well as her intelligence and diligence. The revelation of the antagonist becomes the climactic scene for the novella, whereas it would have had a different focus in both of the other genres.

Even with the blending of three genres, the novella follows one main plot. In order to create and hone its focus, I had to realize that the reader’s eye should always be on Margot. Her actions and reactions form the basis and movement of the story. In an early draft of the novella, Dr. Moore’s character fore-grounded the beginning of the scene in the school library. Margot disappeared unintentionally, and Dr. Moore’s heightened role seemingly set him up to be a more important character than he is. My revisions sought to introduce the scene more effectively by connecting it to the one before it and placing Margot squarely in the action. I wanted readers to



be aware of Margot's presence in the library while Dr. Moore addresses the class. Along the same lines, I directed the third draft away from chronicling Margot's guilt about hiding Evergren from her mother. Removing this angle kept the narrative from getting bogged down and adding complexity to the mother-daughter relationship. The focus returns to Margot's relationships with herself and her grandmother. Her mother is allowed to serve as a supporting character.

Setting Margot up as protagonist was only the first step toward defining the novella's focus as it pertains to genre. I examined the function or purpose of each scene to make sure it contributed to my vision of the work as a story of Margot's maturation. Every scene in the final draft makes an important contribution to the main plot, a subplot, or the development of character. In the first draft of the novella, two short scenes framed the two scenes in which Margot meets Tyler and travels to Evergren for the first time. They misled the reader about Margot's ability to separate dream from reality in addition to placing too much focus on her discovery of Evergren and momentarily suspending the movement of the story. I dismantled several scenes that felt stretched or incomplete and combined their necessary information to form new scenes. For the novella's third draft, I cut the scene in which Todd explains his quest to Margot and Darin after entering Evergren. Since Todd's research with Razuhl was key, I wove Todd's mention of the mission into the following scene, which also lacked focus. This second scene's only previous function was to highlight Margot and Todd's sacrifices in their everyday lives to spend time in Evergren. Their phone conversation included insight into their characters and lives but felt too weak to stand on its own. Combining the two scenes created a helpful window into their thoughts and a stronger building block for the plot. Changes in scene construction made sure each piece was as sturdy as the rest. One scene simply needed to be moved to a different place. Rewriting the dialog, the first scene in which Margot visits her grandmother was moved from after Margot's dinner with Helen to become the opening scene of the third draft. The scene's original function was simply to introduce Margot and Grandma Marshall's relationship. Moving the scene to the beginning of the novella lets it demonstrate a



reason for Margot's boredom, dislike of her life, and the anger she tries to hide. Less thematically and more practically, moving the scene provides an explanation for her tardiness to history class in the following scene. Most importantly, however, opening the story with the cleaning scene positions Margot as the protagonist and focus of the work in addition to establishing the genre as mainstream fiction.

Changing the opening scene, however, prompted a change in the final scene. In the interests of framing the novella and moving its current in a more circular motion, I wrote a new ending in which Margot returns to clean her grandmother's house. From one perspective, the frame shows how some things in Margot's life have stayed the same despite her adventures in Evergren; she must still clean her grandmother's house. The frame's purpose is to highlight the changes in Margot's perception of her life and the people she cares about. By placing Margot in the same situation before and after her adventures, her inner maturation becomes clear and easy for readers to assess. Framing the novella also returns it to the realm of mainstream although it contains traces of the fantasy and mystery genres. Returning the novella to the mainstream reminds readers about the focus of the work, Margot's growth as a character. One excellent example of framing is the decision made by Elizabeth Marie Pope in The Perilous Gard, a work that blends historical fiction with fantasy. The first chapter introduces readers to the heroine Kate and her sister Alicia. The differences between them are soon established: their parents despair over Kate's clumsy and intellectual nature, out of place for sixteenth century England, while they are sure Alicia's beauty will gain her a husband despite her simple mind. Alicia has won over every character except Kate, who takes the blame for one of Alicia's ill-advised actions and is separated from her sister until the book's final chapter. By the time they meet again, Kate has fallen for Christopher and fears that he has also been taken in by Alicia's charm. The frame works in this case because Christopher is quick to assure Kate that he could never marry a woman like Alicia. His resistance to Alicia's bubbly personality proves him to be the perfect match for Kate and casts a vote in support of women who possess intellectual substance. Pope's frame

operates on the same principle as mine but for a different purpose. In Evergren, Margot's attitude changes dramatically, and in The Perilous Gard, the framing shows that Kate should not change to be the way her parents want her to be, that is, more like Alicia. Framing is a flexible technique that can remind readers of how the story began, and why they may have started to read it, while bringing it to a satisfying close. Framing might not feel appropriate for every work, but I would hesitate to restrict it to a particular genre. Some fantasy fiction returns the protagonist to the opening setting; some mysteries end by producing a small but interesting new twist.

Revising the elements of genre provided the novella with a solid foundation, but in some ways, I missed mistakes I made at the micro level while concentrating on the work as a whole. The novella, like any other work of art, contains innumerable smaller components, each of them tethered to the expectations of genre. Repetition can have a powerful impact when employed as a conscious device, but accidental repetition of words, sentence structures, or dialogue tags lowered the quality of early drafts. One word I accidentally repeated throughout the first two drafts was "tower." When describing differences in height, one subject was usually said to "tower" over the other. The term had lost its meaning and originality. Todd seemed to spend much of his time in early drafts cleaning or adjusting his glasses. Instead of reminding readers that he wears glasses, the repetitive actions made Todd seem fidgety or obsessive-compulsive. I also repeated an ineffective sentence structure throughout early drafts. It attached a present tense dependent clause onto a past tense independent clause, creating a multitude of sentences like the one currently being read. This sentence structure dominated the work and produced confusing wording in some cases. For the third draft, I evaluated each instance for clarity and sentence variety. As stated, repetition can be used to strengthen a work and tie it together when used properly, as in J. D. Salinger's classic, The Catcher in the Rye. The phrase "If there's one thing I hate" becomes part of narrator Holden Caulfield's chorus of opinions. He says "It killed me" throughout the book to express either hurt feelings or great amusement. Another repeated phrase is "If you want to know the truth," which adds to the conversational style of the narrative and

strikes an ironic chord, as Holden often colors his adventures in a subjective light. The repetition makes Holden seem more lifelike; people often use the same phrases over and over again when they converse or tell stories. Secondly, the repetition shows readers how little Holden changes or matures during the course of the book. Salinger's example highlights the merits of repetition, which were likely employed to achieve the opposite effects I want Evergren to have. I do not want Margot's character to remain constant. At the same time, Salinger's first person narration allows every sentence to carry Holden's attitudes and opinions. Employing the same repetition in the third person narration of Evergren would read as either a lack of the writer's attention or a quirkiness of the narrator that does not advance the mainstream, fantasy, or mystery elements.

Similarly, dialog tags were repeated too frequently in the novella's early drafts. Most dialog tags that were not needed to provide tone were deleted. I replaced many of them with independent sentences used to identify the speaker as well as add an action or physical description. Taking the time to weed out the unintentional repetition of dialog tags smoothes the work and makes it read more cleanly. Readers can focus on the story instead of being bogged down by its telling. On the other hand, I had to be careful not to strip the novella down too much. In the opening scene of the novella's third draft, Margot tells Grandma Marshall, "I'll be careful." Left to stand on its own with no signifiers, Margot's tone is left for readers to guess with no previous knowledge of her relationship with her grandmother. Establishing the tone Margot takes in reaction to her grandmother's advice is important to solidifying the nature of the conversation, the relationship, and Margot's general mood. Dorothy Gilman's novel Caravan, mainstream fiction tending toward the romance genre, provides some examples of working dialogue tags:

"Good heavens, a madman?" I sputtered. "Bakuli, you've got to be  
*firm*. Tell this witch doctor—"

"His name be Isa."



“Well, tell this Isa that if the rains came as we reached this village they should be glad and ask no more—enough is enough. We’ve done our best and we’re tired.”

Bakuli said slowly, “I do not think this witch doctor *like* us bringing rain, it be village chief who want magic tomorrow.”

“No, Bakuli!” I protested. (118)

Few readers, if any, will question Bakuli’s tone of voice in the line without a dialogue tag. In the other three bursts of speech, dialogue tags serve to instruct the reader as to each character’s mood and reaction to the situation. As I showed with my own example, keeping the reader informed about characters’ intentions while speaking is important, but two dialogue tags stick out in this passage. “Sputtered” may not be the best word choice for the narrator’s first line; the word conjures images of a mouth opening and closing, struggling to form intelligible consonants. The words the narrator is speaking do not merge well with the image of sputtering. For the final line, Gilman does not need to add that the narrator is protesting. The new paragraph indicates the change in speaker; the word “no” and the exclamation point clearly define the narrator’s reaction to Bakuli’s suggestion. The dialogue tags aim to clarify the narrator’s wish to stop a situation from getting out of hand and Bakuli’s insistence that she play along, but skillfully worded dialogue will best relay that information. The focus should remain on the scene, not on the narrating words that explain how the scene is being played out. Mainstream fiction prides itself on this kind of understatement, using precise, suggestive language to tell a moving story without explicitly handing certain information to the reader.

Eliminating impeding repetition and dialogue tags help a story to flow more smoothly and improve its realistic feel; clichés and familiar language should be inspected toward the same goals. I strove to invent new ways of viewing and describing the world. One of my revisions included replacing the term “double take” with a longer description of what that means. Any displays of emotion that seemed unoriginal were either deleted or given a fresh perspective. Part

of my job is to find new words to explain common feelings, both emotional and physical.

Presenting old feelings in a new light will keep readers' attention and make it easier for them to sympathize with the character's plight. For instance, in the novella's climactic palace scene, I had to steer away from describing Margot's anger as "boiling up inside and choking her." Such an emotionally-driven turn of phrase might be better suited to blunter examples of the romance genre. In order for the scene to feel real and immediate within the context of mainstream fiction, readers must believe wholly in her anger and not be cheated by overly-familiar words. Monica Dickens includes unique descriptions in her mainstream novel The Landlord's Daughter. The narrator describes his step-daughter: "She carried the resentment into her five-year marriage, then carried it on afterwards, like a stuffed toy or an old guitar, to Provincetown on Cape Cod, where she now beachcombs among a crowd of eighth-rate painters and rope-sole layabouts much too young for her" (1). Dickens' energized word choices paint vivid mental images for readers rather than reusing common language. Dickens portrays the narrator with the many emotions readers need to recognize in him: the sadness of his wife passing, the awkwardness of answering questions about the long-past relationship that conceived his step-daughter, and the loneliness of being his wife's greatest griever. Dickens allows the reader to glean these feelings from visual clues. The narrator leans his forehead against the window glass. He wishes his step-daughter had not come to the private viewing in his home, and he responds to the prying questions with short sentences: "I never knew him," "Let's go to bed." (9). Readers feel what the narrator is feeling because they are allowed to experience those feelings for themselves rather than having them described in familiar terms.

In addition to clarifying which character is speaking in what tone, I examined several descriptive passages written out of sequence. I restructured small series of actions so that they appear in chronological order so that readers can follow what is happening. When Margot is locked in the dungeon of Jazhara's palace, she hears something bang against the iron bars of a cell door. In an early draft of the novella, "[s]oft footsteps approached as the iron's clang died

away.” Since the clang occurs first, it should be mentioned before introducing footsteps and a new character to the reader. I likewise corrected descriptions written out of sequence. In the second draft, the purple rug in Jazhara’s throne room was described as running “from the entrance to the tall throne across the large room.” For readers to picture this as they read it, they imagine the entrance followed by the throne followed by an image that encompasses the whole room. The revision in the third draft seeks to simplify this description: “A purple rug ran the length of the enormous room to the dais of the tall-backed throne.” Now the readers’ imagination begins at the door and follows the rug to the throne like Margot soon will. Like other issues of craft, the chronology of description is employed for different reasons according to each genre. Mainstream fiction appreciates attention to detail because readers expect it to reflect life as they know it. Descriptions in fantasy should be clean for the opposite reason; the writer is leading the reader through unfamiliar territory and must be able to relay his or her ideas clearly. Details in mystery are equally important as they may contain fast-paced sequences or scenes in which a large number of people are present. A writer who succeeds at keeping actions in sequence is Gregory David Roberts in his novel Shantaram, which blends mainstream and adventure. Chronology is important in his intense, action-packed scenes: “The man on the bed jumped to his feet and kicked outward, trying to use the advantage of high ground. Abdullah and Vikram tipped the bed up, sending the man sprawling behind it. They leapt over the upturned bed and fell on him, stomping and kicking him until he stopped moving” (535). Paying attention to the order in which events or descriptions appear shows a necessary attention to detail. Readers should be kept guessing about plot twists, not the chronology of a series of actions. Putting them in order shows that I have a handle on what is happening in each individual passage and in the broader spectrum of the work. My job is to ensure that the narration leads the reader smoothly through the work so that the reader enjoys the fullest possible experience. Since the novella’s narrator stays close to Margot, I had to remain faithful to her perspective.



Not all of my craft decisions took place in reaction to mistakes. I had to think about how to introduce new characters. Since most people rely on their sense of sight more than the other senses, I usually choose to give a physical description of characters as I introduce them, employing this technique throughout the novella. In mainstream, this helps the reader feel an emotional connection, whether positive or negative, to each character. Grandma Marshall is quickly identified as possessing “thick, unruly grey and white curls.” Readers of fantasy fiction expect the writer to give them every detail necessary to imagine the world being presented. Jazhara’s description comes when Margot spies her across the throne room: “Her deep purple gown left one of her shoulders bare, and gold pins shimmering with sapphires held her jet black hair back from her face.” Characters who may be less self-evident, such as Evergren’s crocodile men and tigresses, also warrant immediate description. The reader will otherwise have no context for the images I want them to conjure in their minds. I do not want readers guessing as to what a crocodile-headed palace guard might look like. As they approach Margot, I reveal that they have “the heads and scaly skin of crocodiles[.] Their purple robes reached their ankles, slit to the knee on either side for mobility. Red and orange feathers decorated the long spears in their hands where the metal connected to the wood.” In terms of the mystery genre, I knew that since Tyler would later appear as the antagonistic Tarinok, I had to provide him with physical traits that Margot and the reader could identify him by in the climactic palace scene. Neil Gaiman, in his modern fantasy novel American Gods, often describes characters’ appearances as they arise. A character named Iceman is given two short lines and then described by the narrator as being “the same size and shape as a Coke machine, with blue eyes and hair so blond it was almost white” (Gaiman 5). Describing characters as they are introduced gives the reader a physical trait or full description by which to identify that character as the reading continues. Assigning unique descriptions, accompanied by descriptions of mannerisms or background, will ensure that readers can manage the growing number of character names in the work.

As editing continued, I delved into what themes were surfacing in the novella so that I could weave them across the entire work. Since Margot is sensitive about being abandoned by her father, I examined the work for other forms of abandonment. By adding a picture of her grandfather to the opening scene, I was able to hint that his passing away when Margot was very young represents another unwelcome departure. I played up the fact that Margot views Darin's decision not to return to Evergren as another unwanted separation. To a lesser extent, I incorporated the image of a dark cave as representing different ideas. In the picture of Margot's grandfather, he stands in front of the entrance to Carlsbad Caverns, which he is looking forward to exploring. When Margot and Jaden are preparing to meet Kamen, the unknown that awaits them is presented as daunting. In the final paragraph, Margot pulls paper towels out of the shadows beneath the kitchen sink, symbolizing that she is no longer afraid of unfamiliar territory.

Of all the questions that fiction writing poses for me, perhaps two of the most important are not specific to any particular work: do I want the work in progress to be as professional as it can be, and am I willing to work hard enough to make that possible? Writing the novella set a myriad of challenges before me, testing my skills of writing, editing, knowledge of craft, and understanding of genre. I realize that wanting to improve my fiction as well as my skills, I should internalize as many craft techniques as I can. At their basis, the techniques of craft serve to bring me to eye level with my fiction and create works that are enjoyable, well-constructed, comprehensible, and noticeably different from other published works. Mastering the techniques of craft offers me a chance to examine my processes and strengthen my relationship with words.



## Works Consulted

Dickens, Monica. The Landlord's Daughter. London: William Heinemann, 1968.

Gaiman, Neil. American Gods. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Gilman, Dorothy. Caravan. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Milhorn, H. Thomas. Writing Genre Fiction: A Guide to the Craft. Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2006.

Roberts, Gregory David. Shantaram. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.

Salinger, J. D. The Catcher in the Rye. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1951.

Margot looked out the door and walked up the path to her grandmother's house, a small  
 cottage with a porch of shining white paint. She rang the doorbell and watched her eyes be  
 fastened upon the sign above the door.

The door opened, and Grandma Marshall greeted Margot with a wide smile. Her face framed  
 by thick, curly grey hair and white cuffs. The old woman pushed the screen door open. "It's good  
 today?"

"It's not too bad yet." Margot stepped onto the porch, detaching the white coat she  
 kept off the bottom of her coat as a habit.

"Did you eat lunch?"

"Yeah." Margot had made lunch before she left home, not always appealed by  
 what her grandmother produced from the refrigerator. Her left eye, often partially closed  
 against the sun, had become very dry since her operation, by a mistake with the wrong vision

Grandma Marshall looked the door behind them and took a few nervous steps across the  
 path into living room carpet. "I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?"

"No, I have two hours before I have to leave for class."

"How do you like school this summer?"

"It's okay."

"Not exciting enough for you?"

Margot forced a smile. "Rock climbing was last summer. Actually, I had medieval  
 history. I got to learn about the people who thought the world was going to end in the year 1000.  
 Modern history isn't very interesting to me, and neither is speech class."

"Speech should be okay for you. If you have your place, you're very good at thinking on  
 your feet." Grandma Marshall chuckled. "You want to talk about history, just asked you

Those are things I've collected over a lifetime. Some of it might look ancient to you. I have  
 every piece of it. I passed with my collection to my daughter long ago. That's good news for

Margot locked her car and started up the walk to her grandmother's house, a small structure suffering patches of peeling white paint. She rang the doorbell and strained her eyes to find other signs of life along the quiet street.

The door opened, and Grandma Marshall offered Margot a wide smile, her face framed by thick, unruly grey and white curls. The old woman pushed the screen door open. "Is it cold today?"

"It's not too bad yet." Margot stepped onto the roses decorating the welcome mat. She wiped off the bottoms of her sneakers out of habit.

"Did you eat lunch?"

"Yeah." Margot had made sure to eat before she left home, not always appetized by what her grandmother produced from the refrigerator. Her leftovers too often included steamed spinach, fish that had become too dry since its preparation, or a casserole with too many onions.

Grandma Marshall locked the door behind them and took a few uneven steps across the pale blue living room carpet. "I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?"

"No. I have two hours before I have to leave for class."

"How do you like school this semester?"

"It's okay."

"Not exciting enough for you?"

Margot forced a smile. "Rock climbing was last semester. Actually, I had medieval history. I got to write about the people who thought the world was going to end in the year 1000. Modern history isn't very interesting so far, and neither is speech class."

"Speech should be easy for you. If you lose your place, you're very good at thinking on your feet." Grandma Marshall chuckled. "You want to talk about history, look around you. These are things I've collected over a lifetime. Some of it might look ancient to you. I love every piece of it. I parted with my meaningless knickknacks long ago. That's good news for

you; it means less for you to clean.” She continued her way into the kitchen. “There should be a new roll of paper towels under the sink.”

Margot reached out and gingerly took hold of her grandmother’s arm. “I’ll get it. Sit down and relax.”

With slow steps, the old woman carried herself to the couch and sat on the flowered white fabric that covered the old cushions. Margot opened the cabinet under the kitchen sink and fetched the roll of paper towels. She pulled out the various containers of glass cleaner and furniture polish, resigning herself to her routine.

“I appreciate you coming, honey,” Grandma Marshall said.

Margot had tired of the cleaning her mother and grandmother expected of her, but she kept her tone light. “No problem.” She turned back to the living room and cleared her grandmother’s date book and pencil cup from the desk. She picked up the translucent green paperweight from where it secured a short pile of opened mail. Margot cupped the irregular mass of stone between her hands for a moment before laying it and the mail on the floor. She moved on to the short bookcase, ignoring the decade-old picture of her grandmother, her mother, and herself that hung above it. She lifted a small cast iron clock and a framed picture from the top shelf. Margot studied the man’s face, a young version of the grandfather she could not remember. His grin came easily, and his shining eyes seemed preoccupied with the adventure that awaited him when he shifted from his pose for the camera. Behind him, a young couple walked through the brilliant sunlight toward the opening of a cave in a mud-colored stone wall. *The entrance to Carlsbad Caverns*, Margot remembered. *That was their first vacation after their honeymoon.* She finished emptying the room’s surfaces and revisited them with the dark grey ostrich feather duster.

“Don’t forget the picture,” Grandma Marshall piped up. “It’s one of my favorites.”

Margot exhaled through her nose and looked up from the bookcase. She traced the frame with the duster, encircling the three generations of women and the spare space around them. She cringed at the uncertain smile that twisted her lips away from her braces.

"At least I don't have to go to the orthodontist anymore," Margot commented over her shoulder.

"Your teeth look beautiful."

"It took long enough."

"But you got them off eventually. I still have my scar."

Margot turned away from the picture to view the real thing. Grandma Marshall traced the scar that crossed her forehead above the left eyebrow.

"It makes you look tough. I bet you've never gotten robbed at gunpoint."

Grandma Marshall smiled. "That's true, honey. I guess it's been good for something. I covered it up with make-up for a while after it happened but not very long. I was already dating your grandfather, and there wasn't anybody else I wanted to impress. He never minded the scar. He used the same word you did. He said it showed how tough I was."

Margot paused a moment to imagine the scene, inventing a gruff but reassuring voice for the young man from the photograph before returning to work.

~ o ~

The slow, deep undertones of Dr. Moore's voice greeted Margot when she opened the library door. She eased it shut to keep it from slamming and worked her way around the counter. The rest of her classmates occupied several rows of tables in a sizeable space between the metal shelves. Dr. Moore stood facing her, his instructions growing loud enough for Margot to hear as she approached. Todd and Darin glanced up, and she slid into the hard wooden chair beside them. She lowered her backpack to the floor by her feet.

"Try to have fun with this project." Dr. Moore shifted his gaze over the students, the jacket of his tan suit unbuttoned to expose the full length of his striped green tie. "Focus on what



you think is interesting, and we can all look forward to more interesting presentations. You have most of the class period left to get started on your research. Bring me any questions you have; I'll be right here at this table."

Margot's classmates collected their folders and notebooks. They slid their chairs against the coarse brown carpet before leaving in all directions. Todd flipped his notebook open to a blank page.

Darin leaned his large shoulders forward to look past Todd at Margot. "We thought you skipped out on us."

"And miss the chance to research Victorian England? Never." Margot unzipped her backpack. She pulled out her own notebook with a pen clipped to the wire spiral. "I was cleaning my grandma's house. Where do we start?"

Todd produced a pen from his backpack in front of him. "I think we should cover our bases by looking at the encyclopedias and the other books on Victorian England. I'm going to start at the computer."

"I guess we'll hit the encyclopedias, then." Margot left her notebook on the table and pushed her chair back. "Let us know when you find something fun and interesting."

Todd headed for the computer bank against the far wall. Margot led Darin to the encyclopedias, where half a dozen of their classmates were already drawing thick books from the metal shelves.

Darin hung back while Margot searched the book spines for a volume containing the V entries. "I'm reading The Lord of the Rings for the third time."

Margot glanced at Darin. Although she had met him the semester before, she was still caught off guard by his knack for introducing random topics. "That's cool. I never read them." Margot pulled a tightly-bound encyclopedia from the shelf and opened it to pristine pages starkly white behind the text.

"You have to." Darin selected a book at random and cracked it open. "There are no history projects in Middle Earth. They're too busy trying to save the Shire and get the One Ring to Mordor."

Margot flipped to the entry for the Victorian Era. "Is that right?"

"It's not as easy as it sounds."

Margot scanned the text. The encyclopedia's dry language did not reassure her about the nature of their group project. "I can't believe we have to research something known as the Anti-Corn Law League."

"What's so important about corn?"

Adopting a sing-song voice, Margot summarized the entry. "The League formed in 1836 following the creation of the Anti-Corn Law Association in the hopes of encouraging the repeal of the Corn Laws, which favored landowners over the working class."

Darin slid his encyclopedia back onto the shelf. "I'm sorry I asked. Are all of our sources going to be that boring?"

Margot kept her finger between the pages and closed the book. "Probably. You saw the pictures Dr. Moore put on the overhead. They were all covered from their chins to the tips of their toes. Most of them were too busy delicately sipping their tea to pay attention to women's rights."

"And you wonder why I read fantasy, where anything goes."

Darin followed Margot back to the table. Todd approached them from the other direction with his notebook in hand. "They have a couple of books that might be helpful."

Margot laid the encyclopedia down and joined her friends in walking toward the back of the library. Todd checked his notes to make sure he was leading them down the right aisle. The three friends entered a narrow tunnel of books as Todd searched for the call number of the first book on his list.

"Todd, you've read Lord of the Rings," Darin continued.

"Of course."

"I'm trying to get Margot to understand where I'm coming from."

"I said I'm not interested," Margot interjected.

"It's not just about the books. It's about all the worlds that don't exist that are much more interesting than anything we'll ever actually do. Todd, you play the same games I do. Are you telling me you'd rather be stuck in school than running around with a big axe in your hands, kicking total ass?"

Todd lifted a weathered hardback off one of the shelves. "All of my characters are magicians."

"Okay, so you wouldn't rather be levitating or whatever? Shooting fireballs and lightning bolts? Running around with hot girls in tight dresses?"

Margot showed her fingertips to Darin, still wrinkled with excess moisture. "You didn't ask me if I wanted to trade history class and cleaning my grandma's house for an alternate reality. You just asked if I'd read Tolkien."

A chuckle sounded from the other side of the bookcase. Margot stepped away from it, unappreciative of the thought that someone had been listening. Through vertical spaces between the books, Margot could see part of a man's face above a white shirt collar.

"You wish you could escape into another world, do you?" the man addressed them.

The three friends exchanged glances beneath eyebrows tensed with uncertainty. "It'd be nice," Darin answered slowly.

"Books are rumored to have that effect."

"Not when you're doing research on Victorian England," Margot replied.

"If you would rather experience it for yourself, you should stop by the county museum. It's where I work, and I'd be more than happy to show you our Victorian exhibit."

Darin spoke up again. "There's a county museum?"



"We have a more extensive collection than you might think. I'm sure I have something that will interest you. Good luck with your research." The man's footsteps retreated down the other aisle.

"He mustn't get out much," Darin muttered.

"I almost forgot about the county museum." Images of an elementary school field trip surfaced in Margot's mind.

"Margot, you can draw, can't you?" Todd asked. "You and Darin could go down to the museum and take some notes on the exhibit, maybe make a sketch of it."

"Why can't you go?"

"I'm going to check my usual Internet sources."

Darin snatched the hardback from Todd's hands. "Count me out, too. I'm using this source right here."

Todd leaned his hand on one of the metal shelves. "Please go to the museum for us, Margot. It won't take long, and it could get us an easy A. Let us know what you find."

~ o ~

Margot walked up the sidewalk toward the county museum. She opened one of the heavy metal doors and breathed in air thick with dust and antique fibers. Margot signed her name into the visitor registry and moved up the aisle between the front counter and a reproduction of a log cabin's only room. She pulled a small spiral notepad and a golf pencil out of the pocket of her jeans.

A dark-haired man emerged from the office walled off behind the counter. "Welcome to the museum."

Margot tried to decide if she recognized his voice. "I'm looking for the Victorian exhibit."

The man smiled. "Of course. I met you in the campus library yesterday, right?" He walked around to Margot's side of the counter and extended his hand. "Tyler Jones."

Margot shook his hand, finding it slightly chilled by the air conditioning. "Margot Lawrence."

"The Victorian parlor is right back here." Tyler led her down the aisle of exhibits and objects in glass cases. "Come get me if you need anything. The items are all pretty clearly marked, and the numbers on the tags correspond to the descriptions printed here." He indicated a laminated sheet of paper adhered to the side of the case.

"Thank you."

Margot expected Tyler to walk away, but he lingered. "Is it Victorian England in particular you don't like, or is it any time period you have to study for school?"

"Just the Victorian period so far. I like ancient and medieval history better."

"What do you like about it?"

"Its complete sense of being foreign. I think it's interesting to think about cultures that didn't have everything we take for granted." Margot stopped herself from launching into a history lesson. She figured Tyler already knew any facts she could recite.

"That interests me, too."

Tyler smiled politely and retraced his steps toward the office. Margot turned to admire the intricate fans and hair combs in the case. Beside it, barred from trespass by a velvet rope, stood an elaborate replication of a Victorian sitting room. Velvet cushions softened the rich, dark wood of the chairs and sofa. Fine white china patterned with unfamiliar pink flowers lined the shelves of the breakfront. Margot examined the elegant beauty of the mannequins' extravagant dresses and hats. She jotted down a few notes on the thinly lined paper of her notepad.

The sound of nearing footsteps made Margot look up. Tyler carried a small wooden box in his hands, which he set on the glass counter beside her. "This is from my own private collection."

"Is it from the Victorian era?"

"Much more recent, but I think you'll be very interested in its content." Tyler passed behind Margot and disappeared around the corner.

Margot tucked her notepad and pencil into her pocket. She picked up the worn wooden box, the corners of which were reinforced with pieces of metal. Margot turned the box in her hands to examine it before opening the latch. The box held a single bronze coin surrounded by purple velvet lining. She picked it up and angled it beneath the ceiling's fluorescent lights. On one side, the coin displayed the proud face of a beautiful, unsmiling woman. Margot squinted to read the words below the bronze picture.

"Jazhara, Queen of the South." Margot glanced down the vacant aisle. "Where is this from? Aladdin's Castle?" Turning the coin over, the bronze silhouette of a grand palace caught the light, encircled by another inscription. "*Camintos*—what language is this supposed to be?—*camintos protel Evergren*. Wow, they even managed to misspell—"

A change in color and light caught Margot's attention out of the corner of her eye. Where she had seen the row of exhibits only moments before, an oval area revealed the three dimensional image of a forest clearing like a seven-foot-tall window. Margot's muscles tightened, and she took in a deep breath. She set the wooden box on the glass display case and stared through the inexplicable portal. Holding the coin in her other hand, Margot reached through the oval opening, feeling warm and muggy air close in around her skin. Jerking her hand back, Margot searched the aisle for Tyler but heard no one. She drew in one more deep breath and stepped through the portal. The soles of her sneakers settled onto long blades of green grass.

Margot breathed in fresher air than she had outside the museum, unadulterated by car exhaust and other fumes. Chattering birds flew overhead, and Margot could not help admiring the healthy trees that surrounded the clearing. She glanced behind her to make sure the portal was still there. All she could see was the rest of the field's wide circle. *I shouldn't have come through so quickly*, she reproached herself, *but I had to know if it was real. At least I still have the coin. Maybe it can take me back.*

Tucking the bronze coin into her pocket, Margot squared her shoulders and headed for the trees. She pressed her palm against the first one she reached, feeling the ridged bark press back. Margot brushed bits of it from her skin and immersed herself in the foliage. *Where am I?* she wondered, the muggy air serving as a reminder that this was not the park she had visited as a child. Margot weaved through the trees and underbrush until she discovered another clearing much larger than the first. Before her stood the palace she had seen on the bronze coin. Its clean white stones seemed to shine in the pure sunlight. Above the surrounding wall, Margot saw balconies adorned with flowering plants of vivid orange and gold. The windows revealed three stories, but she felt at a loss to estimate the palace's depth or width.

A flock of birds cried out as they flew from the trees on Margot's right. She took a step backward into the brush, unsure of what had startled them.

"Don't move," a gruff voice commanded before Margot could see its owner. "You are under arrest by order of the Queen."

Margot started to reach into her pocket for the bronze coin. She froze in shock as half a dozen men with the heads and scaly skin of crocodiles strode toward her. Their purple robes reached their ankles, slit to the knee on either side for mobility. Red and orange feathers decorated the long spears in their hands where the metal connected to the wood. Margot stared at their reptilian faces growing closer and screamed as two of them took hold of her arms.

One of the crocodile men stopped directly in front of her. Gold medals decorated the left side of his robe where it covered his thin chest. Black eyes peered the length of the snout, and sharp white teeth flashed when he spoke. "Who are you?"

"My name is Margot. I came here through some kind of portal. I don't know where I am."

"You are trespassing in the Queen's royal clearing. What is your business here?"

"Queen Jazhara?"

"Yesss."



Margot flinched at the sound as much as the smell of fish that streamed into her face.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. I don't have any business with the queen."

"Perhaps she would like to conduct some business with you." The crocodile man wearing the medals waved his free hand, and the two who grasped Margot's arms escorted her away from the woods. The rest of the group moved with them. Margot struggled, hoping to free at least one hand and pull the coin from her pocket. When she looked up from the divots her sneakers were digging in the grass, she saw that the crocodile men were leading her toward a tremendous iron gate set into the white stone wall. Four more crocodile men stood guarding the entrance, and they straightened their postures upon the arrival of Margot's captors.

"General." The guards bowed slightly at the waist and kept their spears upright, supported on the ground.

The crocodile man with gold medals gave his order. "Open the gate. Queen Jazhara has a visitor."

The guards turned and pushed the iron gate open. The six guards who had arrested Margot conducted her into the courtyard between the outer wall and the palace itself. They stepped onto a stone path leading up to massive doors intricately carved from dark wood. Flanking the path, flowing fountains and brilliant flowers adorned lush green lawns. Two figures draped in purple dresses napped in the sunlight at the foot of the doors, and Margot drew in a fearful breath at their tiger striped fur.

"Open the doors," the General commanded, striking the butt of his spear against the path.

The two black and orange figures stretched, revealing human forms with feline features. They stood up gradually and observed Margot with sleepy golden eyes before opening the doors. The twin tigresses moved to either side of the doorway, and the crocodile men led Margot into the palace.

A purple rug ran the length of the enormous room to the dais of the tall-backed throne. The ceiling loomed high above as the crocodile men ushered Margot along the rug. Sunlight streamed through the windows and stretched in rectangular patches across the stone floor. A woman leaned sideways on the throne with one elbow placed on the armrest to support her. Her deep purple gown left one of her shoulders bare, and gold pins shimmering with sapphires held her jet black hair back from her face. Margot recognized her from the bronze coin in her pocket.

The General set the end of his spear on the floor and bowed his head low. "A trespasser, my Queen. She introduced herself as Margot. We found her at the edge of the clearing."

Jazhara gazed down at Margot with indifference dimming the blue of her eyes. "You have not been here before."

Margot hoped her voice would not fail her. "No."

"But I know why you're here. You're not interested in what's happening in your own world."

"My own world?" Margot planted her feet more firmly as she began to feel light-headed. "How do you...What's going on?"

"Welcome to Evergren, Margot." Jazhara splayed her fingers over the end of the armrest, and her emerald ring caught the sunlight. "You are far from being the first person to travel between worlds. How do you think we speak the same language? The only reason to pass through a door of any kind is because one is interested in what lies on the other side. The particular reason is a negligible matter."

Margot remained silent until she realized Jazhara was waiting for her to speak. "Yes, I wanted to know what I would find."

"Did this new world look like paradise to you?"

"A little."

"Nothing is perfect in either of our worlds. General Alaric, search her and lock her away."

"No!" Margot lurched forward, but the crocodile men gripped her arms tighter.

Under the supervision of General Alaric, one of the other guards wrenched the objects from her pocket with clawed, scaly fingers. Margot glanced all around her for a possible escape route.

Jazhara leaned forward. "Let me see what she's carrying."

The guard bore the notepad, the pencil, and the coin up the three steps to the dais. Margot watched Jazhara's lips moving but could not hear her instructions. The guard bowed and returned to Margot's side. He rapped the butt of his spear on the floor, and the guards led Margot forward.

"I need the coin," Margot called to Jazhara. "Please."

"You may have your other possessions, but the coin belongs to me."

Alaric retrieved Margot's notepad and pencil from Jazhara and tucked them partway into her pocket. He led Margot and her two captors to the deepest corner of the throne room. Margot descended a winding staircase, complying to move her feet to keep from falling. The flickering firelight from torches set in the walls replaced the steady rays of the sun. A row of empty cells met the group when they reached the bottom of the stairs. The crocodile men pushed Margot into the nearest one, and Alaric latched the iron, grille-patterned door shut.

"Please give me the coin," Margot pleaded through the square spaces in the door. "I want to go home."

The creatures gave no answer as they climbed the staircase out of sight. Alone in the dim torchlight, Margot imagined slithering, unfamiliar bugs lurking in the cobwebbed shadows. She lingered by the door and let tears slip down her cheeks. Her forehead lolled forward and struck the iron bars harder than she expected. *Come on*, she pleaded with herself. *Why can't you think on your feet now?* Margot gripped the iron bars of the door, but the most forceful shaking barely rattled them. She searched the floor for anything that might help her open the door or at least make enough noise to summon a guard. Nothing but dust and particles of sand littered the white

stones. Against Margot's will, she recalled the only other time in her life when she had felt so utterly helpless.

Margot's father stood silhouetted against the screen door by the bold sunlight illuminating the yard behind him. Her mother's hands shook as they rested on Margot's young shoulders. Countless angry words had fallen away into a heavy silence no body-builder could have lifted. Her father set his jaw, resolute in his final departure, and Margot could still hear the shriek of the screen door as he pushed it open.

Further down the corridor, something banged against the iron bars of a cell door and snapped Margot out of her thoughts. She hardened herself against her father's memory and backed into the middle of her cell. The clang of iron died away, and soft footsteps approached. A man with thick stubble on his face moved into the torchlight. He stopped in front of Margot's cell and stared at her through the bars. His tattered clothes assured her he was not one of Jazhara's subordinates.

"Can you get me out of here?" Margot whispered.

The man kept his voice low as well. "I can see you're not from the southern province."

Margot took a step forward. "I came here through a portal. I read the words off a coin with Queen Jazhara's face on it, but the guards took it. I don't know how to get home."

"For a moment, I thought we'd need my lock picks." The man patted his left pants pocket. Fingerless leather gloves exposed his long, tapered fingers. "I don't know everything about the portals—I've never used one—but don't worry. You don't need the coin."

"You know the words?"

The man nodded. "I can't speak them, or the portal won't close until I step through. I prefer to stay where I am." He motioned to the notepad and pencil protruding from Margot's pocket. "I could write the incantations for you."



Margot hastily passed her belongings through the iron bars and watched the stranger write out the mysterious words whose power she did not fully understand. He passed the notepad and pencil back to her.

"Someone taught them to me ages ago." The man held Margot's gaze. "Don't let Jazhara frighten you."

Margot dried her cheeks with the back of her hand. "She's done a pretty good job." She looked over what the man had scribbled down for her.

"There are good people here, too, and beautiful places to see. You should come back so you can see more than what the palace dungeon has to offer. I wrote down the incantation that brought you here. You can return any time you like."

Margot's eyes reached the bottom of the small, lined page. "I see that."

"If you're looking for a friend or just a guide, I live in the swamps east of the palace." The stranger reached into his pocket and drew out a cylindrical object that fit in the palm of his glove. "Do you have a compass?"

"No." Margot accepted the compass through the iron bars and noticed the dirt caked into its crevices. "What's your name?"

"Jaden. Yours?"

"Margot."

"If you do come back, try to stay clear of Jazhara's clearing. The guards won't bother you unless they see you near the palace."

"They have crocodile heads," Margot whispered as if offering a confession.

"Don't guards have crocodile heads where you live?"

Margot shook her head. "No crocodile guards or cat people."

"You might feel at home in the swamps, then. They mostly stick to the palace."

"Maybe." Margot secured the compass in her pocket and turned the open notepad toward the torchlight. "*Caminmi protel patradomus.* My path leads home."

The oval portal opened at Margot's side, encasing the fluorescent-lit exhibits of the county museum. She stuffed the notepad and pencil deep into her pocket. "Thank you, Jaden."

Jaden bowed his head of dark blonde hair. "Until we meet again."

Margot stepped through the portal into the musty air of the museum. She looked down at the linoleum tile that replaced the white stone blocks of Jazhara's palace. The aisle remained vacant, but the wooden box that had contained the bronze coin no longer sat on the glass display case. Margot checked her watch; an hour had passed since her arrival at the museum. The extravagant colors of the Victorian parlor failed to rekindle her interest in Dr. Moore's assignment, and she found herself striding toward the exit. Tyler called to Margot from the other side of the front counter, and she jumped. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Margot tried to catch her breath and stepped forward to lean on the counter. "You were right. That's the most fascinating thing I've ever seen. I lost the coin, though. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"How did you find it, the other world?"

"I found the coin by chance, in the same box I left for you." Tyler checked his watch. "It was being overlooked at an estate sale because no one thought it had much value. When I took it home and discovered Evergren, I realized it had quite a lot of value, at least for me."

Margot continued gazing up into the long, oval-shaped face, waiting for Tyler to say more.

"You should do what I did and go let this sink in. But you must promise to come back soon so we can discuss it further."

"I promise. Thank you."

Margot pushed herself away from the counter and exited the museum. She hurried down the sidewalk to her car, fishing the key out of the small fifth pocket of her jeans and jumping inside. She backed out of her parking space, and the doors locked automatically. Margot realized

what wise advice Tyler had given her; she wanted nothing more than to drive and give herself time to think.

~ o ~

Margot reached the third floor and caught sight of Todd and Darin walking ahead of her. Without breaking into a jog, she pursued them as quickly as her legs would carry her. Todd was laughing when Margot headed them off.

"Guys, you have to come see this."

"See what?" Todd consulted the clock on the wall. "There's only five minutes before class."

"I found the escape we were talking about." Margot pulled the spiral notepad from her pocket. "You won't believe it until you see it for yourselves."

Darin glanced at Todd with one eyebrow raised. "That's a real nice notepad, Margot. Did you get it at Dollar Tree or Dollar General?"

"I'm serious. We can miss one class."

Todd's eyes shifted to the door of their classroom. "I was saving my absences for later in the semester."

"I thought you wanted some excitement as much I did. If you're not coming, I'll go back to Evergren without you." Margot walked away, prepared to find Jaden's hut on her own but hoping her friends would catch up with her.

"Is that some new role-playing game?" Darin asked.

Margot looked at her friends over her shoulder. "You'll never be happy with games again. I don't want to talk about it here."

Todd and Darin reappeared at her side. She hurried down the stairs, passing the main floor and continuing into the basement. Margot opened the door to the women's bathroom and listened to make sure no one was inside.

Darin stopped in his tracks. "Whoa, Margot, what were you showing us again?"

"Trust me."

Margot led her friends inside the restroom. Beige tiles covered the well-lit space, a stripe of pink running around the walls to add a splash of color. A padded bench sat against the right-hand wall, and a full length mirror hung beside it. Margot opened her notepad to Jaden's barely legible handwriting.

"You both want an escape, right? The kinds of worlds only books and video games can show you?"

Todd and Darin nodded.

Margot licked her lips. "*Camintos protel Evergren.*"

Todd's blue eyes filled the lenses of his glasses. "Holy mother of God!"

Margot turned to the portal and examined the forest clearing on the other side.

"Holy shit," Darin agreed in disbelief. "How did you do that?"

"You should've come to the museum with me. That guy we met in the library led me here. It's called Evergren."

"How did he know about it?" Darin asked.

Todd extended his hand toward the portal. "Is it safe?"

"He had a coin he got at an estate sale. It's safe as long as we stay away from the palace. I made a friend we can visit who can probably tell us anything we want to know about this place. You have to go in before me because the portal will close when I step through."

Darin took a tentative step forward. "You're right behind me, right?"

"All the way," Margot told him.

Darin moved through the portal, and his triumphant laughter carried into the bathroom. Todd joined him in the clearing, and Margot passed through the portal behind him. The muggy air invigorated Margot as the three friends studied their surroundings.

Margot swung her backpack to the front of her body by one shoulder and retrieved Jaden's compass from the front pocket. "The swamps are east. Jaden gave me his compass so



we could find our way there.” Margot slipped her arm back through the drooping strap of her backpack. She held Jaden’s compass in front of her, turning in place until the arrow pointed due east. “Do you want to come with me and meet him, or do you want me to—”

“We’re coming,” Darin answered.

Margot let the compass guide them through the woods. After a half-mile, the grass became soggy under their sneakers. A large pond glimmered in the sunlight to the right, its edge overgrown with brilliant green plant life. Trees rose out of the water and the ground beyond its far shore. Bugs buzzed around the students’ ears, and frogs croaked to one another in the deepening marsh.

Todd pointed to a tan, irregularly shaped structure on a wide plateau of drier land.

“What’s that?”

“It looks like a teepee gone wrong,” Darin said.

“I think it’s somebody’s house. Show some respect.” Margot returned the compass to her pocket and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Hello? Jaden? It’s Margot.”

A woman with grey-blond hair came out of the dwelling. Her dress flowed to her knees in a pattern of reds, blues, greens, and browns.

Margot offered a weak smile. “Hi, my name is Margot. Jaden said I could visit him in the swamps. Are we in the right place?”

“You are. Jaden told me he met you in the palace yesterday. I can take you to his hut. I know he wanted to speak to you again. I’m Sage.”

Margot’s friends volunteered their names as well, and Sage began to lead them toward a second misshapen dwelling. Margot began to think of the plateau as an island adrift in the algae-spotted wetland.

“Have you known Jaden for a long time?” Margot asked Sage.

“Twenty years, give or take. We’ve been friends since he was a boy.”

“Have you always lived in the swamps?”

"I used to live further north, first in the city and later in River's Bend. Jaden's always been here, and neither one of us will probably ever leave."

"Doesn't it make you nervous?" Todd asked. "Sleeping out here like this? Aren't you afraid of wild animals?"

"The swamps aren't as dangerous as you think. As for living in a hut rather than a house, you get used to it."

The foursome reached the deerskin hut. Two flaps were tied to either side of the doorway to keep it open. Margot peered inside over Sage's shoulder. Jaden smiled and motioned for his visitors to join him. Margot followed Sage into the hut, constructed by stretching animal hides over a wooden frame. Several flat pillows lay on the packed dirt floor, the walls of the room lined with simple shelves and trunks. Sage sat down on one of the pillows, and the three other guests sat down with her.

"I hope you didn't run into any trouble this time." Jaden took a pipe and a wooden box from the shelf behind him. He sat down on a stool facing his guests and opened the box on his lap.

Margot shook her head. She felt heat rise in her cheeks as she watched Jaden sprinkle the contents of the box into his pipe, finding herself attracted to him in his bedraggled, unshaven state.

Jaden compacted the substance in his pipe bowl with the tip of his finger. "You brought friends with you?"

Margot pointed them out as she introduced them. "Todd and Darin."

"I see you've met my oldest and dearest friend." Jaden gestured to Sage with his pipe. "She's the kindest, most knowledgeable wise woman in the south, let alone the swamps."

"And Jaden is the best thief in these parts, if you have need of those services," Sage replied. "No one can sneak into the palace and slip out again like he does."

Margot reached into her pocket. "I still have your compass."

Jaden waved it away. "Keep it. Even if you don't return, you'll have something to remember Evergren by."

"Don't return?" Darin glanced at his friends. "We'd be crazy not to."

"You don't have to convince me," Margot told him. "I'm coming here every chance I get."

Jaden laughed goodheartedly. "I thought you might like it here. I'll never have a lot of gold or expensive clothes, but I don't need them. There are few things in this world the swamps can't provide me."

"It's a simple life," Sage added, her voice smooth and reflective. "It's rewarding in ways the city doesn't understand."

Margot peered beyond the dry plateau, finding a gathering of distant huts amidst the wildness of the swamps. She wanted to close her eyes and let the bird songs wash over her.

"You're always welcome," Jaden informed the visitors. "At least one of us is usually at home."

The three students responded with simultaneous gratitude. They shared glances that sparkled with the intention of taking full advantage of their new opportunity.

"Would you like to stay for a while and have some tea?" Sage gestured toward the doorway. "I can go make some."

"Sure," Margot answered for herself and her friends. "Thank you."

~ o ~

Margot recognized her own dark curls and fresh, pretty face when she looked at her mother. Helen sported a long green apron with KISS THE CHEF embroidered in white thread and dished out a plate of spaghetti for her daughter. Margot had given it to her several years before. The kitchen itself was still decorated in the clean whites and hunter greens that had inspired the gift.

Echoes of excited I-told-you-so's still rang in Margot's ears, hardly softened by the short ride home from campus. The walk from the clearing to the swamps and the thick, fresh air made her stomach gurgle. "Can I have more? I'm really hungry."

Helen added more pasta and meat sauce to the plate in Margot's hands. She filled a plate for herself and switched off the light above the stove. They took turns scooping applesauce and green beans onto their plates before Margot preceded her mother into the dining room. They sat down across from one another and spread paper napkins across their laps.

Margot twisted the long noodles around the tines of her fork. She had agreed to wait to return to Evergren until Friday, when Todd and Darin could go with her. She decided to try her luck in keeping her true plans a secret from her mother. "I'm going out Friday night."

"Is there a new movie coming out?"

"I guess so. Todd and Darin wanted to go see something."

"That sounds fun." Helen halted her fork halfway to her mouth. "Grandma called. She wanted me to thank you for cleaning on Monday."

"Sure. No problem."

"I appreciate you doing it as much as she does. She's always been independent, but the older she gets, the more she feels the aches of her accident. She can't move around as easily as she used to."

Margot nodded and struggled to focus on the topic at hand. "She never talks about her limp. She only mentions the amnesia and how she was about my age when she got into the accident."

"I know. I think she got used to the physical pain but could never get past the idea that she'd lost some of her memories. She doesn't even remember where she was going when it happened."

"That would freak me out."



Margot pulled into the parking lot of the county park on the outskirts of town and stepped out onto the black asphalt. Todd and Darin climbed out of their cars. Margot locked her purse in the trunk and tucked her car key into her pocket.

Darin observed the encroaching twilight. "I told my Dad we were going bowling."

The three friends started walking toward the main trail, noting the few additional cars in the lot.

Todd took a small flashlight out of his jacket pocket. "I told my parents we were studying at the library and getting something to eat afterwards."

"The movies," Margot chimed in.

The friends picked turns in the path at random and buried themselves deep inside the park away from the other visitors.

"We'll never pay to go to the movies again," Darin spoke up.

In the still shelter of the trees, Margot produced her notepad from her pocket and read the incantation. The three of them stepped through the portal with little hesitation, and it closed with Margot's passage. Using Jaden's compass and Todd's flashlight, Margot and her friends made their way to the swamps. In the starlight, the shapes of the trees, both standing and fallen, came out to play. Lily pads adorned with small flowers dotted the silver surface of the pond.

Todd pointed to a luminous ball in the midst of a cluster of stars. "Is that their moon?"

Margot and Darin did not answer. They joined Todd in staring up at the sky.

Sage lingered in front of her hut, holding a black shawl around her shoulders. "I'm glad you came," she greeted them. "Jaden feels like telling stories tonight. I just came home for my shawl."

Margot, Todd, and Darin accompanied Sage to the next hut. Jaden knelt on one knee outside his dwelling and tended to a fledgling fire. He turned his head to see who was approaching. He plucked the pipe from the corner of his mouth and smiled.

"You can't have good stories without a good fire."

Sage sat down in the grass, and the three visitors joined her in front of the fire. Jaden fed the flames a few extra twigs and settled himself into a cross-legged position. He puffed on his pipe for a few moments.

"A new audience deserves the most exciting story I can think of. The one about Kamen is a good one. It's not very old, and it didn't happen very far from here. A beautiful young woman called Kamen fell in love with the most feared mercenary in the southern region. They say he never misses his mark. Kamen's parents didn't approve of her interest in Saber, but she didn't listen to their advice. She ran away with Saber. No one tells the same story about how she died, but she did, and Saber came to realize he could not live without Kamen. I suppose he did what any fearless, heart-broken man would do; he traveled as far as he needed to in order to find someone powerful enough to resurrect her soul from the Netherwood. Her soul was recovered, but Kamen's body..."

Sage picked up the story where Jaden left off. "Kamen's body had begun to rot. Some people say she has no eyes; others that her legs are only bones. The only story that never changes is that the beautiful woman Kamen once was is not beautiful anymore."

Margot's nose crinkled at the imagined stench. "That's not really a true story, is it?"

"Saber did come here looking for someone to resurrect her." Sage's seriousness deepened the wrinkles fanning out from the corners of her eyes. "He put a knife up to my throat. I assured him I don't have the magic of life and death he was looking for."

"The swamps have always been quiet. We've never welcomed violence here, which fortunately gives Jazhara little reason to bother with us," Jaden explained. "How about you, Margot? Do you have a story for us?"

Margot shook her head shyly. She felt cozier than she had in a long time, nestled in her fleece jacket with the fire warming her face. "I don't know any stories."

"Everybody has a story. How did you find the portal that brought you to Evergren?"

"We met this man named Tyler who lent me a coin with Queen Jazhara's picture on it. When I read the words off the back, it opened the portal."

"One of our coins?" Jaden tapped the pipe against his lips. "How did he get that?"

"He said he got it at an estate sale. That means he didn't know the original owner but was able to get a hold of it for himself. I promised I'd go back and talk to him about it some more."

"You should ask him where he's traveled," Todd spoke up.

"I will." Margot turned her attention back to Jaden and looked forward to spending the night in his company.

Jaden's strong, sure voice mixed with the crackling of the fire. "I'd be interested in hearing any story he has to tell you."

"Sure. Anything he says, I'll pass your way."

~ o ~

Zippering her jacket up over her sweater, Margot hoped to slip out of the house without being seen. She slipped down the stairs and found Helen at the kitchen table with the newspaper in one hand and a mug in the other. Helen glanced up at Margot from her reading before turning her full attention to her daughter.

"You're dressed early. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I promised Todd and Darin I'd go back to the museum and do more research for our project."

Helen took a sip from the mug. "How was the movie last night?"

Margot took a moment to remember her alibi. "It was okay."

"Do you want some breakfast?"

"No thanks."

Margot pulled her keys out of the purse on her shoulder and let herself out the door. She paid little attention to the world around her on the ride across town. She pulled into a space in



front of the museum and followed the sidewalk to the entrance. Once inside the metal doors, the musty air tickled her nose while she signed herself into the guest book. Tyler stood on the other side of the front counter, straightening an array of pamphlets and fliers. He looked up as Margot approached.

"Miss Lawrence, it's good to see you again."

"I was hoping you'd have time to talk."

"Of course. We can talk in here." Tyler motioned Margot to his side of the counter and led her into the office. They each turned a chair away from its desk and sat facing one another in the small room.

"Did you go to Evergren a lot after you found the coin?" Margot asked.

"As often as I could. I became obsessed with it. I opened the portal whenever I was alone. I travel there less frequently now that the museum demands my time."

"I can't believe I lost the coin. These crocodile-headed guards took it from me under orders from Queen Jazhara. Have you met her?"

"No."

"You don't want to meet her. She's cruel and unfair. She had me locked in the dungeon when she could've just had me escorted off her property."

"The Queen didn't scare you away from Evergren, did she? I can reopen the portal for you any time you like."

"No, you don't have to do that. I wanted to know where you—"

The long, clear *ping* of the counter's service bell cut Margot short. Dark annoyance flashed in Tyler's eyes. He pushed himself up and walked out to greet the visitor. Alone in the cramped space, Margot found Tyler's momentary hostility toward the interruption disconcerting. She gazed over the pages covering the bulletin boards and listened to an old woman's high-pitched voice ask an exhaustive series of questions about donating money to the museum. Tyler stepped back into the office a few minutes later and reclaimed his chair.



"I'm sorry. Where were we? Have you told anyone about your discovery?"

"My friends."

"No one in your family?"

"No, my mom doesn't know anything about it."

"Is that all the family you have?"

Margot felt increasingly uncomfortable as Tyler's questions grew more personal. Trying to hide her panic, she pretended to check her watch. "I'm sorry, Mr. Jones, I didn't realize what time it was. I'm running late for an appointment at school."

Margot rushed out of the office. Tyler called out to her from the other side of the counter. "Feel free to come back when you have more time."

"I will," Margot replied over her shoulder with no intention of returning.

~ o ~

The portal closed behind Margot, and she started for the eastern edge of the clearing with Todd and Darin on either side of her. Generously inhaling the freshest air they had ever breathed, they slowed their pace from the rush that had brought them there.

Darin scratched the back of his head. "Margot, I wanted to talk to you about something. Campfire stories are cool, but I want some action. I just sat on my ass for an hour and fifteen minutes. At the risk of sounding like my father, I think I should get up and do something."

"You did not just compare Jaden and Sage to Dr. Moore."

"No, I compared sitting down to sitting down."

Margot turned to her other companion. "Are you leaving me, too, Todd?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I guess you want to meet some real live magicians or something."

Todd looked up from the long grass at their feet. "Do you think they know any?"

"How about you, Margot?" Darin asked. "Are you ready for some adventure?"

Margot shrugged. "I'm happy in the swamps."

"I thought you were bored."

"I don't see how listening to campfire stories about another world is the same as housecleaning and homework."

Darin nodded. "You got me there."

The three friends picked a path through the woods and neared the edge of the marsh. They arrived at the dry plateau and discovered Sage's hut unoccupied. Jaden stood some distance away outside his own dwelling, and the friends approached him. The dark-haired thief whistled while he inspected the deer skin walls.

Margot hesitated to break Jaden's concentration. "Where's Sage?"

Jaden squinted at the side of the hut and reached his hand out to feel it. His gloves left his fingers uncovered for such a purpose. "Sage went out to the fields to pick some herbs. Several families live deeper in the swamplands, and Sage is nursing one of their children back to health."

Todd and Darin exchanged a glance.

"Go ahead," Margot prompted them.

Darin spoke up first. "Do you know of any guilds around here? Manly guilds, not cooking or sewing or anything."

Jaden turned to face his visitors. "I know of a tree-felling guild."

Margot chuckled and brought her hand to her mouth. "Yeah, Darin, you can be a lumberjack."

"That is not okay," Darin shot back.

"Would you prefer the weaponsmith's guild?" Jaden asked.

"That sounds good. How can I find that?"

"The nearest one is in Raven's Bend. It's a little town north of the palace."

Todd blew across the lenses of his glasses and set them back on his nose. "Is there a mage's guild?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Jaden replied. "If you're looking for the Mage School, it's not far from the palace, either. You can see the tower from here."

The three students turned around and set their sights in the distance. The tall, pale grey tower of the Mage School stood out against a skyline of trees.

"Be careful out there," Jaden advised. Margot could not help finding his solemn expression handsome and self-assured. "Queen Jazhara doesn't know you two are here, but her guards are probably on the lookout for whoever rescued Margot. She is not a woman to be taken lightly."

Todd and Darin nodded. "We'll be careful."

Margot hoped her momentary bout of shyness would not show in her voice. "Why were you in the dungeon the day I was captured?"

Jaden grinned from ear to ear. "When food gets scarce, I cut through the dungeon and help myself to the storerooms. I often invite myself to the palace through one of its vulnerable openings and have a look around. It's my way of protesting Jazhara's place on the throne."

"Did you ever get caught?"

"Almost, but almost isn't the same as the real thing."

"What does he do?" Margot asked. ~ o ~

As dusk prepared to fall over the park, Margot, Todd, and Darin walked the paths that took them deeper into the trees and fading wildflowers.

"Are you sure you don't want to come to the Mage School?" Todd asked Margot. "I'm sure Mage Razuhl would let you apprentice under him, too. I think you'd like him."

"No thanks."

"Are you up to sharpening a few swords?" Darin offered.

"I told you, I'm sticking around the swamps. I bought these this morning." Margot lifted her foot to show off a bright yellow galosh.

Todd looked around them at the silent, unmoving trees. "I think we can open the portal now."

The three friends retrieved compasses and small flashlights from their pockets. Margot recited the incantation she knew by heart.

*"Camintos protel Evergren."*

The sight of the portal re-energized Margot after a week of classes. She followed Todd and Darin through the opening into the clearing. Todd gave the others a cheery salute and headed off toward the distant mage tower. Darin escorted Margot through the woods to the swamps and parted ways with her a stone's throw from Sage's hut. Within minutes, Margot sat enjoying the warmth of a small fire in Sage and Jaden's company.

"If you liked the story of Kamen, you'll like this one." Jaden drew a few puffs from his pipe. "Years ago, when I was only a child, a young man angered one of the gods. The god placed a curse on him so that for the rest of his life, he will bring misfortune and disaster to anyone he tries to help. They call him the Accursed, but few of his victims are willing to admit the curse torments his generous heart. He's a curse on everyone he tries to aid. Most of the southern villages have thrown him out for good, but he still wreaks havoc from time to time."

"What does he do?" Margot pressed him.

"There was a time when the Accursed wanted to apprentice as a weaponsmith like your friend, but it wasn't long before the man training him burned his arm."

"Last year, the Accursed tried to help a herdsman catch a sheep that had escaped from the pen." Sage smiled gently. "The Accursed meant well, but all of the sheep were soon roaming free, and the herdsman chased him away."

"Some people think he's trying to undo the curse by looking for good deeds to perform," Jaden added. "The rumors in Raven's Bend say it hasn't happened yet if it ever will. Others just think he doesn't want to stop helping people, even if it leads to disaster."



Sage stood up and brushed the dirt from her dress. "I have some people to tend to myself. I'll see you again soon, Margot. Good night, Jaden."

Margot and Jaden offered their good byes. They watched Sage return to her hut through the pale starlight. Margot lowered her gaze to the fire, not sure of what to say.

Jaden peered into the glowing contents of his pipe bowl. "Margot, there's someone coming to the swamps that I want you to meet. Can you come back tomorrow night?"

"Of course."

~ o ~

Helen hugged her daughter good night and left the living room in her terry cloth robe and slippers. Margot sat back down in front of the television, impatiently switching channels until a full half hour had passed. She slipped up the stairs and shut herself in her room. Margot whispered the incantation that opened the portal and hurried through it on her way to the swamps.

Starlight showed Margot her path to the edge of the clearing, and she pulled the small flashlight from her pocket to guide her through the trees. Up ahead, a hearty fire danced outside Jaden's hut and summoned Margot to it. She tucked the flashlight into her jacket pocket and listened to the peal of Sage's laughter. The sound reassured her as she approached the three figures by the fire, guessing that one of them must be the person Jaden had been expecting.

The figure in the middle raised her eyes to meet Margot's and lifted a hand to cover her face. Jaden reached out and gently lowered it. Margot came to a stop beside Sage, trying not to stare at the woman's striking beauty. Black curls cascaded to her shoulders, their darkness matched by a mole on her right cheek an inch from her lips.

"Margot, this is Marsala," Jaden introduced her. "Marsala, this is Margot. She comes to Evergren through the portals between worlds. Can you believe it?" Jaden's warm tone and the way his eyes barely left Marsala's face betrayed his love for her. Margot felt her attraction to him transform into an appreciation for his loyal friendship. *That's what happens when you read too many books*, she laughed silently.

Marsala bowed her head in greeting. "Your acquaintance humbles me."

Margot offered a genuine smile in return. "It's very nice to meet you."

"It isn't often Marsala graces us with her presence," Sage explained. "She's from a small village in the northern desert."

"Originally," Marsala added in an earthy voice.

"How long have you known Jaden?" Margot asked.

Marsala turned her head and searched Jaden's face. "Seven, maybe eight years."

Jaden rested his hand on Marsala's shoulder. "Margot continues to visit us here while her friends have sought out adventures beyond the swamps. Darin is training at the weaponsmith's guild in Raven's Bend, and Todd is apprenticing under one of the mage scholars at the school."

Marsala focused on Margot once more. "I know why you stay. You know that Jaden can teach you more than any guild, more than the Mage School. He will keep you from harm."

"He's already rescued me from Queen Jazhara's palace," Margot told her.

Marsala's dark eyes glimmered in the firelight. "I am sure not even the Queen knows the palace's dark passageways as well as Jaden does. He has been winding through its corridors for years."

Sage pushed herself out of her sitting position. "Margot, will you help me bring out something to eat?"

"Sure."

Leaving Jaden and Marsala in each other's company, Margot followed Sage to her hut. They entered the small structure before they spoke a word.

"She's beautiful," Margot confided.

"Yes, she is. Her own people don't think so." Sage looked among the baskets and clay jars, setting dry wafers on a wooden plate. "They think her mole is a sign of imperfection and the displeasure of the gods."

"It's just a mole."

"Not to Marsala or her native people. She covers her face with a veil while she travels. She's reluctant to remove it even here."

"How often does she visit?"

"Every few weeks. Marsala rides with the caravans that distribute food and supplies to small villages and those of us scattered about the swamps."

Margot's eyebrows tilted with sadness. "Did her home village kick her out?"

"When she was still a child. Marsala doesn't feel welcome anywhere. Maybe some day, Jaden will be able to convince her to stay here, but until then, her visits are always a cause for celebration."

"Doesn't she have any family?"

"As far as I know, they made the final decision to cast her out. She hasn't seen them since she left."

"Is she angry?"

Sage lifted her shoulders in a gentle shrug. "She rarely mentions them. She lives in the present, which is good, but to her, the present stretches to the far end of her future."

Margot let her backpack slam down on top of the kitchen table. She dialed Todd's number and rubbed her temple with two fingers. Her eyes wandered around the kitchen until he answered. "I got a D on my Spanish test."

Todd groaned. "If you get a frame for it, we can hang it next to my stats test. My grades aren't any better than yours."

"Shit." Margot looked over the white appliances that stood out against the green counters and walls. "My mom and I always go out to celebrate the end of the semester. If I keep this up, it won't be a happy dinner. It'll be an interrogation—she'll know something's going on. I've been working so hard to make sure she doesn't find out about this. I'm always washing my



clothes because they smell like smoke from hanging out with Jaden and Sage. I have to keep my mom out of my closet so she doesn't find the muddy galoshes I'm hiding in there."

"I know how you feel. My mom wants me to get good grades so she can wave it in my aunt's face. They've had this rivalry going since my cousin and I were born the same year. Who learned to walk first? Who said the first word?"

"You've been to Evergren."

Todd laughed. "Maybe I'll try explaining that to my mom when she can't find anything else to brag about when my grades come out."

"Are you still going to meet us at the park tomorrow after dinner?"

"I'll be there. Mage Razuhl and I are preparing for an important mission."

"Really? Like what?"

"There's a village west of the Mage School that's suffering from famine. Somebody promised to bring them food decades ago, but he never did. He's only known as the Betrayer, and Mage Razuhl's boss wants him to find out who he was. Mage Razuhl's letting me come along as his assistant. No one else at the school has the time, but I want to go. The village has become somewhat of a ghost town, and the people who are living there need to know they're not forgotten."

"Are you taking food to them?" Margot asked.

"I offered to, but Mage Razuhl reminded me that we don't know how many people are still living there. He said it's not part of our mission, but I hope we'll be able to bring them something as soon as we can."

"How far is the village?"

"Mage Razuhl said it'll take us an hour or two to get there. We have to take a wagon."

"You have to let me know what it's like. I'm leaving for the swamps in a little bit."

"I will. I'll see you tomorrow."



Sitting on the ground outside Jaden's hut, Margot lifted her clay cup in the warmth of the steady fire. Jaden and Sage held theirs up as well.

"A toast to Marsala." Jaden's voice strained slightly with emotion. "May your travels be safe and return you to the swamps as soon as the gods will allow."

They set their cups to their lips and drank the thick, sweet berry juice.

"Thank you." Marsala remained solemn as her dark eyes came to rest on Jaden's face.

"The caravan, like the sun, moves endlessly, always returning to where it has been before. I will come back as I always do."

Jaden laid his hand over hers. "You don't have to stay with the caravan. It will still move if you decide to leave it."

"I barely remember my village. The caravan is the only thing I know. I forgot how to be stationary a long time ago."

"We could teach you," Margot spoke up.

Marsala did not turn her head. "Perhaps one day I can live as you do. For now, my destiny travels with the caravan."

Margot fell silent, unsure of how to remedy the awkward turn the conversation had taken. Sage suggested they sing a few folk songs for Margot before Marsala took her leave. Margot tried to learn the words, but Jaden's overcompensating smile preoccupied her.

~ o ~

Filing into the third floor classroom out of sheer duty, Margot slumped into the desk next to Darin in the back row. The other students slid into their seats one by one and unzipped their backpacks. Margot stared into space until Darin nudged her.

"Look at what the guild gave me." Darin stifled a yawn with one hand as he dug into his pocket. He showed Margot a silver coin, and Queen Jazhara's face flashed on one side.

"It looks a lot like the bronze coin Tyler had."

"They told me that when Jazhara took the throne, she put her face on all the southern currency."

"What was on it before that?"

"A picture of the palace, I think."

Dr. Moore carried his leather briefcase to the front of the room. He opened the briefcase on the large desk and pulled out a manila file folder.

Margot glanced at the doorway to the hall. "Where's Todd? Do you think he's sick or something?"

"Sick of coming to class. He probably went to the Mage School."

Margot's concern melted slightly. "He is working on a mission, but it's not like him to skip class without letting us know he won't be here."

Darin flipped his notebook open. "Do you think something's wrong?"

"I hope not, but I think we should make sure he's okay as soon as class is over."

Darin nodded, and they tapped their feet through Dr. Moore's lecture, unable to sit still. When the bell rang, they burst out of the classroom and sped down the stairs to the basement restroom. Margot opened the portal and followed Darin through it into the clearing. She spotted the top of the light grey tower belonging to the Mage School.

"I guess we should let the tower guide us to the school and see if we can find Todd. I hope the Queen hasn't caught him."

"If she has, we just get Jaden, right?"

Margot nodded. They set off toward the tower, grunting at the weight of the history books in their backpacks. Eventually, they arrived at a wall of light grey stones about eight feet high. Peering through the scrolling metal bars of the gate, Margot and Darin could see the four story Mage School attached to the tower at the ground floor. Margot's eyes swept over the short, vibrantly green lawn.

"Hello?"

A thin woman draped in green robes strolled into view from the other side of the wall.

Green eyes glowed beneath a tan, hairless scalp. "How may I serve?"

"We're very sorry to disturb you," Margot said. "We're looking for a friend of ours.

His name is Todd Gibson. He was working with somebody—Darin, do you remember the mage's name?—something with an R."

"Mage Razuhl?"

"I think that's it."

"I will inform him of your arrival. Please wait here."

The mage tucked her hands into the ends of her green sleeves and walked up the stone path to the front doors of the school.

"This guy in the guild only has one ear," Darin spoke up.

"How'd he lose the other one?"

"I asked him, but he said I didn't want to know."

After a few minutes, the bald mage reappeared, and a taller figure in midnight blue robes followed her to the gate. Strands of silver highlighted his brown hair, and he approached the two visitors. The bald mage parted from him, disappearing from view.

"Mage Razuhl?" Margot asked.

"I am. You seek my counsel?"

"We're looking for our friend, Todd Gibson. Is he here?"

Razuhl released a long breath and slowly drew in the next. "I am sorry. It must be my unfortunate duty to pass on the news of his death."

Margot screamed and covered her mouth with her hands. She stared at Razuhl and tried to fathom what she had heard.

"What are you talking about?" Darin demanded.

"Todd was aiding me in my research on the Betrayer of—"

"What kind of research gets people killed?"



Razuhl paused, and Margot saw a flash of pain in his eyes before his expression became unreadable. "We were unable to begin our research. Early this morning, Todd and I set our course for the archives of Teren."

"The what?"

"The Teren village records. High Mage Tarinok insisted we add a third member to our party, and he attracted unwanted attention on the road."

"Spit it out. What happened?"

Margot offered an answer that her hands muffled. Darin and Razuhl waited for her to repeat herself. She eased her hands down from her mouth. "Was it the Accursed?"

"Yes," Razuhl replied. "He wanted to help us, and my orders were to accept that aid. Before we could reach Teren, one of the renegade mages extracted Todd's life."

Margot tried not to form any images of it in her mind. "Where is he?"

"We brought him back to the school."

"Can we please take him home?"

"Certainly. We have no reason to keep him here."

Razuhl unlatched the iron gate and let the two visitors pass through into the courtyard. The bald mage stepped forward to close it again, and Razuhl led the visitors up the pathway to the great wooden doors. Margot wiped the tears from her cheeks. She shivered despite her jacket and the muggy air.

Darin leaned his head down toward Margot's. "Maybe you shouldn't see this."

"I'm not leaving him."

Margot and Darin followed Razuhl through the corridors of the school. Lanterns lit their path from the ceiling, and Razuhl led the visitors into an empty room where Todd's body lay on a cot. Todd's eyes were closed beneath the lenses of his glasses, and someone had folded his hands over his abdomen. Margot stared at the chest beneath the grey zippered jacket and willed it to rise with the breath of life. She yearned to see Todd's shy, gentle smile once more.



Darin glared at Razuhl. "How did you say he died? He doesn't have a scratch on him."

"A renegade mage cast him down." Razuhl's grey eyes fell on Todd's expressionless face. "The dark arts are not allowed at the Mage School. These mages have chosen a life of destruction we cannot condone. I am at a loss to explain it further."

Darin rubbed his hands over his face and down onto the back of his neck. He turned to Margot. "How are we going to explain this to his parents?"

"I don't know." Margot edged forward and touched Todd's hand with her fingertips. She had not expected such cold, rigid flesh. She rubbed her fingers against her jeans. "Is it possible to tell them the truth?"

"They'd never believe us. They'd think we were crazy."

"I know, but there's only one other explanation I can think of." Margot's voice squeaked, and she paused. "What if we put Todd in his bed and let it look like he died in his sleep?"

"Jesus..." Darin lowered his hands from his neck. "His parents will find him and freak out. There's nothing else we can do."

"How may I be of service?" Razuhl asked in a low voice.

Margot looked up and tried to speak intelligibly. "How can we take him home?"

"I'll open the portal. Then we can carry him through." Razuhl let his hand linger at Todd's shoulder for a moment. "*Caminmi protel patradomus.*"

Margot stared at the image of Todd's vintage Star Wars comforter on the other side of the portal. Darin picked up Todd's stiffened legs, and Razuhl lifted him by the armpits. Margot hurried through the portal and made room for the others in the modestly-sized bedroom. She watched the portal dissolve and suddenly realized she should pull the comforter and sheets back from the pillow. She turned the bed all the way down, and her companions laid Todd out with his head on his pillow. Darin untied Todd's shoes and pried them off. Margot tucked Todd in gingerly and removed his glasses. She folded them and handed them to Darin, who set them on

the corner of the desk. Margot choked back tears at the sight of Todd lying peacefully in his bed. His all-American possessions surrounded him, his collection of comics, his stereo, his computer. Razuhl's eyes moved slowly over the room and examined the objects Margot knew must seem so foreign to him. The clock on Todd's stereo read just past four.

"We should leave before his parents find us." Margot waited for a nod from Darin.

*"Camintos protel Evergren."*

Darin preceded Razuhl and Margot into the Mage School. They turned away from the vacant cot in the middle of the room.

"Get me the hell out of here," Darin muttered with flashing eyes.

Razuhl led his visitors along the corridor and out into the sunlit courtyard.

"Sir," Margot blurted out as they strode toward the gate. "I have to know more. Why was the Accursed allowed to go with you? How did you get the portal to lead straight into Todd's room?"

Darin interrupted Razuhl's answer. "Let's go, Margot. None of this matters anymore."

The bald mage in her green robes unlatched the gate and held it open.

Razuhl faced Margot. "We may speak on it another time. Leave me your name, and I will make sure you are escorted to my quarters upon your return."

"It's Margot. Thank you for your help." Margot joined Darin on the other side of the iron gate. She broke down as she walked away, barely able to recite the incantation that would reopen the portal. Stepping into the basement restroom, Margot excused herself into one of the stalls to grieve alone.

~ o ~

The bulk of the week dragged by in a series of unreal events that created a permanent ache in Margot's stomach. Todd's father called on Monday evening to inform Margot of his son's unexpected death. Darin barely spoke to her in class. When Friday arrived, Helen drove her daughter to the funeral home.

"I'm here for you, honey." Helen parked the car and reached into the back seat for her purse.

Margot nodded. She climbed out of the car and took a few steps toward the funeral home, not used to wearing high heels. Helen caught up to her daughter and opened the door. Margot entered unwillingly, not in the mood to step through one more portal.

The sign in the entryway pointed those grieving Todd R. Gibson to the right. The room was sparsely populated, and Margot could see the Gibsons from the doorway. Standing near the head of the casket, Mrs. Gibson clutched a white Kleenex while her husband shook hands with a curly-haired man in a dark suit.

Helen motioned to pieces of poster board covered with pictures of Todd in neat, carefully arranged displays. "Do you want to look?"

Margot realized how much of Todd's life was new to her, and she studied the pictures as a tribute to her lost friend. She watched Todd grow from an infant in his father's arms in a hospital room to an open-mouthed child excited at pulling video games from their Christmas wrapping paper. He smiled proudly, holding a grey rabbit in one hand and displaying a blue ribbon in the other. As a teenager, Todd stood with one hand on what Margot guessed to be his first car. Helen rubbed her daughter's back reassuringly, and Margot snatched a Kleenex from the box on the table. She dotted it into the corners of her eyes and focused once more on Todd's parents. Margot approached the couple with guilt weighing heavily upon her slender shoulders.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Gibson." Margot's voice wavered, but the couple nodded appreciatively. She forced herself to look down at Todd's motionless slumber. She offered Mr. Gibson a hug and then embraced Mrs. Gibson, who held on much longer than her husband.

"The doctor gave me a tranquilizer," Mrs. Gibson confided to Margot and her mother. The middle-aged woman sniffled and released Margot from her arms. "It's still hard, though. They wanted to do an autopsy, and I said no. They're not going to cut up our son."



Helen held her hand out, and Mrs. Gibson took it. "Thank you so much for coming. It means so much. They said Todd probably didn't suffer very much. We think he must've gone out for a morning jog or to the library or something, felt sick or had a headache, and he just lay down in his bed and went to sleep."

Margot felt Mrs. Gibson's pain added to her own, and the guilt reduced her to breathless sobs. The three adults comforted Margot with words and gentle touches. She could not bring herself to look any of them in the eye. She hoped that Todd's death had been as painless as his mother thought.

~ o ~

The portal to Evergren remained closed until Sunday, when Helen gave Margot a lingering hug and left her daughter alone to clean her mother's house. The familiar incantation led Margot to the familiar clearing south of the palace, and she headed for the swamps. She wanted to see her friends before returning to the Mage School.

Margot arrived at Sage's hut, and the wise woman read her face. Sage put her arm around Margot's shoulder and ushered her to Jaden. He sat on a pillow on the floor of his dwelling, surrounded by a random assortment of household objects.

Jaden raised his eyes from the bronze candlestick in his hand. "What's wrong?"

Margot stared back, not sure she was solidly inside her own body. "I can't stay long. Razuhl is expecting me at the Mage School. Someone killed my friend Todd when he was on his way to Teren."

"Killed?" Jaden echoed. He left the candlestick on the dirt floor and pushed himself to his feet.

"Razuhl said that a renegade mage somehow sucked the life right out of him. I have some questions I hope he can answer. I want to know exactly who told him he had to take the Accursed with them—that's why they got into trouble. If everybody knows he's bad luck, it might've been a conspiracy."



"I don't know anyone who hasn't heard of the Accursed. Do you need an escort?"

"No. I can make it."

Margot accepted Sage and Jaden's warm embraces. She basked in the selfless friendship they offered her before leaving the hut and starting on her long walk to the Mage School. Conscious of how little time she might have before Helen returned home, Margot hurried along until she arrived at the school's iron gate.

The bald mage bowed her head in recognition. "How may I serve you today?"

Margot's words came in breathless syllables. "Razuhl should be expecting me. Margot."

The robed woman unlatched the gate with narrow fingers. "Please follow me." She led Margot along the path across the courtyard and through the large double doors into the school. They ascended to the second floor, and the mage knocked on a door to their right. When Razuhl answered, the bald mage retreated down the steps. Margot stepped into a small, simply decorated room. Thick, vertically organized books filled several bookcases, and a large wooden chest with a bulky iron latch sat between two closed doors.

Razuhl gestured to the chair in front of the desk, but Margot shook her head. He did not press her. "You have questions for me."

"I do." Margot folded her arms tightly. "Ever since I found out Todd was dead, I've felt terrible. I brought him to Evergren, and I let him leave the safety of the swamps when I knew there could be danger of some kind. I have to know why the Accursed was sent with you."

"I understand your concern," Razuhl assured her, "but I feel you are wasting your time looking for the answers to Todd's murder. I will answer any questions you have about the portals between worlds, but I do not see how I can ease your grief."

"You can help me by telling me about what happened. Was the Accursed sent with you on purpose? I can't shake the feeling someone was trying to sabotage your mission."

Razuhl paused. "I do not know for sure, but that is my worst fear as well. I did not ask High Mage Tarinok to explain his reasons. He told me that the Accursed had offered his assistance in any school matters and that I should include him on the mission to Teren."

"If Todd died because of this research, I want to help you finish it. If we can find out what someone might want to hide, maybe we can find out who tried to keep you from that information. Todd trusted me enough to tell me about Teren before he died. I need you to trust me now. Let me help you."

The mage lowered his voice. "The best way for you to help is to leave with me for the village of Teren in the next few days. I will keep your assistance a secret from the High Mage in the case that he cannot be trusted. We must proceed with the utmost caution. There may be maleficent forces at work in the school."

"Thank you. I won't let you down. Can you tell me how the portals work? It'll save time if I can open them closer to the school."

"Intention is the basis of all magic. Focus your mind on the place you wish the portal to open as you speak the incantation."

Margot nodded. "I'll be back in two days."

"I will have everything prepared."

~ o ~

By the time Margot and Darin left Dr. Moore's classroom, the rest of their classmates had disappeared from the hallway.

Darin tried to keep his voice down. "We don't need an extension on our Victorian project. We need our friend back."

Margot took a moment to answer. "I can't stop thinking about him. I introduced him to Evergren, and I'm not going to let him die without getting to the bottom of his death."

"You're going back there?"

"I went back yesterday and talked to Razuhl. I'm leaving with him tomorrow for the village he and Todd were supposed to visit."

"That's stupid. What if you get hurt, too?"

"Then at least I won't die from guilt."

"Good luck. I'm never going back. No video game prepares you for this kind of thing. We don't have enchanted armor, and if we die, it's permanent." Darin reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the coins he had received from the guild. He passed them to Margot. "Be careful."

Margot watched Darin walk away, feeling more abandoned than she had when Todd and Darin left the swamps to pursue their own adventures. She was determined to find out what had happened to Todd, and she refused to back down from what she knew must be done.

~ o ~

The round clock on the kitchen wall had not reached eleven when Margot stuffed a granola bar into the pouch of her hooded sweatshirt. She left the house and drove out to the county park that had become more and more familiar over the past few weeks. Margot started down the main trail, walking deep into the park to avoid running into the other guests. She closed her eyes and pictured the Mage School.

*"Camintos protel Evergren."*

Margot frowned at the sight of the clearing not far from Jazhara's palace. Telling herself to ask Razuhl more about magic, Margot stepped through into the grass. She set her eyes on the stone mage's tower and kept her ears open for any crocodile guards watching the woods. Margot jogged the last few hundred feet toward the school's iron gate.

The mage in green robes bowed her head respectfully. "Margot, how may I serve you?"

"Razuhl should be expecting me."

"He is." The bald mage unlatched the gate and opened it. "I will show you to his private quarters."



Margot entered the courtyard and fell into step beside the mage, looking up into the clear, pastoral face. "I'm sorry. I've been here several times, and I don't know your name."

"My name is Aria, but everyone calls me Ari."

"How long have you been at the School, Ari?"

"I came here when I was a girl. I began learning magic several years later. The mages have been very kind to me, and I owe them the utmost gratitude. I am an orphan, and many others fell to fates far worse than I did."

Ari opened one of the large wooden doors to the school and let Margot walk inside ahead of her. "Mage Razuhl told me what happened to your friend. I'm deeply sorry."

The two women started up the staircase. "I appreciate it," Margot said, sliding her hand up the railing.

Ari turned to her in front of the door to Razuhl's chambers and spoke in a quiet voice. "You are not Mage Razuhl's only visitor." She knocked on the door a few times and left Margot alone.

Razuhl opened the door into the room, allowing Margot a full view of a short, pudgy man holding his worn cap in both hands. He barely raised his brown eyes from the rug to meet Margot's gaze, and an uneasy feeling froze her in place.

"Margot, there is a visitor who wishes to extend his gravest apology," Razuhl informed her.

At once, anger boiled up inside Margot, and she rushed forward at the man in the middle of the room. "How dare you come here?" She gave no thought to what she was doing, bringing her hand down against his shoulder. Margot hit him again and kicked him with the toe of her yellow galosh. "You killed my friend. I hate you!"

Razuhl grasped Margot's arms and pulled her away. Margot squirmed in protest until she saw that the man had begun to cry. The weathered brown cap in his hands matched his threadbare pants, shirt, and jacket.



Margot looked the short man over from head to toe. "This is the Accursed?"

"His name is Xavius." Razuhl released Margot from his grip. "He has come to pay his respects."

Margot tugged down the bottom of her hooded sweatshirt and tucked her hands inside the pouch. She watched Xavius take an off-white handkerchief from his pocket and dab it to his face. He tucked it away and stood up straight.

"Dear visitor from another world," Xavius began in the awkward tone of rehearsed words, "please accept this—" He wiped his forehead with the cloth of his sleeve. "Accept this humble apology." Xavius' face scrunched toward the center, and he blurted out an earnest plea. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I was only trying to help, and I was so excited when the mages said I could go."

"Didn't you know you bring bad luck on everyone? How did you think the mission was going to end?"

Xavius' lower lip quaked. "I had hoped this time would be different, miss." He fell to his knees at Margot's feet and bowed his head low above her galoshes. "I wish I could undo this curse."

Margot took a small step backward.

"It was my voice that attracted the dark mage's attention," Xavius wailed. "Forgive me."

Margot looked away at Razuhl's desk. The wooden surface held a few books neatly stacked along the left-hand edge. She realized that Xavius wept out of genuine distress for what he had caused. Margot watched Xavius' tears leave shiny trails down his face. She forced the words from her mouth. "I forgive you, but only because you didn't mean to."

Xavius stood up, still holding his hat in his hands. He wiped his cheeks with the sleeve of his jacket. "Thank you. More people curse me than forgive me. I was born with a good heart,

you see, and this terrible curse haunts my every step. Thank you, good mage, for indulging me once more.”

“That is all right.” Razuhl patted Xavius on the shoulder. “Can you find your way out now? Margot and I have business to attend to.”

“Of course.” Xavius bowed to Razuhl and bowed a second time to Margot. “Good day.” He let himself out of the room, and Margot felt certain she would never see him again.

~ o ~

Margot rode beside Razuhl in a horse-drawn wagon headed for Teren. She ate the granola bar she had stashed in the pouch of her sweatshirt while she listened to the details of their mission.

“The village is mostly deserted. Everyone but the poorest and most stubborn has left during the many years the famine has ravaged the area. I hope to find whatever information we can on the person who once promised them food and never returned. No matter what we see, we must remember that we are there to learn what we can of the Betrayer. We do not have the resources necessary to save Teren.”

Suddenly self-conscious of her snack, Margot finished the granola bar and stuffed the wrapper into her pouch. “We also have to find out why your first trip was sabotaged.”

“I have not forgotten Todd’s sacrifice.” Razuhl’s hands gripped the horse’s reins firmly, but his eyes seemed to focus beyond the horizon. “Every step of this mission will be in his memory.”

Margot and Razuhl’s wagon crested a hill in the road, and the village of Teren appeared below. The small houses, each topped with a thatched roof, sat intermixed with slightly larger buildings that advertised various merchandise on wooden signs hung outside their doors. Margot and Razuhl’s wagon rolled down into the quiet stillness of the village square. A few women with long, wide scarves over their hair turned wide eyes toward the horse and wagon. They held the scarves in place beneath their chins with bony fingers.

"Good afternoon." Razuhl pulled on the reins, and the horse came to a stop. "We mean you no harm. The Mage School sent us to inquire about the causes of your suffering. Is there anyone in the village who can tell us about the Betrayer?"

The fear in the women's eyes subsided into curiosity. They stepped forward as Margot and Razuhl dropped to their feet on the dry dirt.

"The only ones who remember the Betrayer are gone or dead," one of the women replied.

The other woman coughed dryly into her hand. "You will need the village records. Nimus keeps them in the Overlook, the tallest building in the village."

Margot lifted her eyes to the sky. A four-story building on the right-hand side of the road proved to be the only structure with more than two floors.

Razuhl patted the horse's side. "Can you also point us to the local stables?"

"The stables have been empty since before I was born." The woman's voice sounded devoid of warmth and texture. "Keep an eye on it, or it might become another victim of the famine."

Razuhl thanked the women and began to lead the horse toward the Overlook. In opposition to its height, its width and depth were smaller than any other building in the village. Most of the windows had lost their shutters, and one plank dangled dangerously over the front door by a single hinge. Razuhl knocked and waited.

A short, stocky man swung the door inward. He stared at his visitors with one good eye, his right eyelids nearly meeting over the iris. Sections of thick black hair twisted in all directions.

"I am Mage Razuhl of the Mage School, and this is my assistant, Margot. We've come to investigate the identity of the Betrayer."

Nimus collected his saliva and spat it at his feet. "May the gods curse her, if she's still alive."



Margot leaned forward, unsure of what she had heard. “*She?* The Betrayer’s a woman?”

“Didn’t you know?” Nimus waved his hand for them to come inside. “If it’s information you want, all the records are upstairs. You’re welcome to have a look at them.”

“What should we do about the horse?”

“Just leave it there.”

Margot laid her hand on the horse’s soft neck. “I think the villagers might eat it.”

Nimus stepped into the doorway and sent his voice echoing throughout the village.

“Listen here, you! Anyone caught bothering this horse will be beaten with a long reed!”

The record keeper limped across his front room to the bottom of the staircase, and his two visitors began to follow. A modest kitchen area filled the first floor along with a table and chairs. The second floor contained what Margot hesitated to call a living room because it was sparsely furnished with a bookcase and wooden bench. Nimus led them up through his bedroom into the topmost story of the building. Sunlight filled the room through four sizeable windows. Stacks of books lined the base of each wall. In the center of the room, a table and stool supplied a humble work space.

Nimus looked over the numerous volumes with a sense of pride. “Here they are.”

“Are the records arranged in any particular order?” Razuhl inquired.

“No, but I can help you find a place to start.” Nimus limped over to one of the windows and flipped through a few of the books before opening one on the wooden table with a *thud*.

“Holler if you need more help.”

Nimus started his way slowly back down the stairs. Margot and Razuhl stepped forward, eager to read the open pages.

Margot’s shoulders slumped with disappointment, and she looked up at Razuhl. “This entry is for the Rescuer.”



Margot sat straight up in bed, her heart pounding throughout her body and thundering in her ears. Her first thoughts were jumbled, but as she awoke to her senses, she tried to make sense of the images in her nightmare. *Evergren's underworld*, Margot realized as she rubbed her eyes. *We brought his body home, but where's his soul?*

~ o ~

The closer Margot came to Jaden's hut, the more clearly she recognized his voice intertwined with Sage's in light-hearted conversation. Margot stepped into the doorway, the rims of her eyes still pink from crying. Jaden broke off mid-sentence at the sight of her.

"What do you know about the underworld?" Margot asked.

"The Netherwood?" Sage pulled a large pillow up next to her. "Come in and sit down. What happened?"

Margot lowered herself onto the pillow. "I dreamed that Todd was lost and wandering around the Netherwood." Margot looked from Sage to Jaden, who held the tip of his pipe to his lips. The quiet, familiar gesture reassured her, and she continued. "I think Todd's soul might be stuck there, and he wants to get out. I want to take him home."

"The Netherwood isn't a tangible place," Sage explained gently. "It's where all souls go when their bodies die. No one living can travel there."

"Do you have any idea how I can reach him? I feel sick about it. I really think Todd is miserable where he is."

Jaden rested his pipe on his pant leg. "I'm sorry. I've never tried to contact anyone in the Netherwood."

"Neither have I." Sage smoothed her dress where it lay across her knees. "But there is someone who might be able to help. I've never met her, and it might be a great risk, but I can only think of one person who's been to the Netherwood and returned to the living."

"Sage, no. You can't send Margot to find Kamen. We don't know what kind of person she'd be dealing with. Anyone who's allied herself with Saber could be just as dangerous as he is."

Margot spoke up right away. "Does anyone know where Kamen lives?"

"We'll ask around for you," Sage assured her. "Someone is bound to know where she's been hiding."

"Sage, I can't believe you're encouraging this."

Sage met the eyes of her oldest friend. "She won't be going alone. I assume you'll be with her every step of the way. For my part, I'll make some protective amulets to safeguard you both. It's the least we can do for Margot and perhaps the most important thing we can do for Todd."

"Of course I'm going." Jaden propped the tip of his pipe between his lips.

Sage rested her hand on Margot's back. Margot's eyes focused beyond the floor of the hut. "I guess we'll get to see for ourselves if her legend is true."

~ o ~

Margot kept her dream a secret from Razuhl, riding beside him once more in the wagon on the road to Teren. The more vividly she imagined Todd's soul lost among the metaphysical trees of the Netherwood, the more she steeled herself in preparation for the long day of research ahead. Nimus led them up the stairs of the Overlook to the utmost room and trailed back down again with his slow, awkward steps. Margot sat on the floor with her legs crossed as Razuhl did, determined to find out why anyone would have put Todd's life in jeopardy.

~ o ~

When Margot's muddy yellow galoshes carried her into the swamps the next day, she found Sage cooking over an open fire outside her hut. Pieces of white fish sizzled in the thin metal pan. The wise woman waved Margot toward her and spoke in a low tone.

"Jaden's been asking everyone about Kamen's whereabouts. I'll let him tell you about it. We agreed that you should take something with you as a present for Kamen as an extra measure of security. It's a beautiful gold-colored scarf I bought from Marsala's caravan several months ago."

"Thank you. I know that with the two of you looking out for me, I have nothing to be afraid of."

"Jaden's waiting for you in his hut."

Margot managed a smile of thanks and slowly walked on to Jaden's humble dwelling. He sat on a pillow with a hand-drawn map unfolded before him.

Margot stepped inside and knelt facing Jaden. "Did you find Kamen?"

"She's living in a cave in the mountains not too far east of here." Jaden dropped his fingertip onto the map, the palms and backs of his hands covered as always by his leather gloves. "By all accounts, Saber is still her lover, so we should use caution when we approach. I'll borrow horses for us as soon as we're ready to make the ride."

"I'm free tomorrow. Can you have the horses by then?"

Jaden nodded. "It's not a journey I'm looking forward to but one I'm willing to make for your friend's sake. I only hope Kamen will be able to tell you what you want to hear. We don't know what we're going to find in that cave."

~ o ~

Helen accepted Margot's housekeeping job again, and although Margot was grateful, she waited impatiently for her mother to leave before she slipped away into Evergren. Jogging the distance from the clearing near Jazhara's palace to the swamps, she arrived short of breath but eager to start the day's mission. Jaden helped her up into the saddle of a muscled brown mare and swung gracefully onto the back of the other horse.

Sage watched with her arms folded over her waist. A gentle breeze swirled her grey-blond locks about her face. "Everything you need is in the saddle bags. We packed plenty of

provisions for the road and the golden scarf for Kamen. I hope it will show her that you come in good faith."

"Thank you," Margot said softly.

"Here are the amulets I made for you." Sage held up what she had been hiding in her hand, two pieces of marked clay strung on leather cord. "I used the strongest magic I know."

Margot passed one to Jaden and slung the other cord around her neck. She tucked the clay amulet beneath her clothes.

"Best of luck to you."

Jaden started his horse in the direction of the eastern mountains, and Margot followed his lead. She held on tightly to the saddle horn, not willing to slow their progress because of a lack of expertise. They reached the trail that led from the edge of the swamplands into the grass-covered mountains, and Jaden consulted his map. They turned onto the left fork while the main trail rose up between two green peaks spotted with trees. A cave opened in the hillside to their right.

Jaden checked the map once more. "I don't think this is Kamen's. Hers should be just up ahead."

The two riders slowed their pace and reached a tree that grew on the other side of the trail from the next cave. Crude markings had been carved into the tree's bark, and Margot looked to Jaden for an explanation. He shook his head.

"I can't read it, but this is the right place."

Margot and Jaden dismounted, and Jaden tied the horses' reins around the trunk of the tree. Margot looked up the slope at the entrance of the cave, and a series of rough coughs erupted from inside.

Jaden laid his hand on Margot's shoulder. His grey eyes locked with hers as he held out the golden scarf he had procured from his saddlebag. "Whatever we find in there, choose your words carefully and stay calm. I'm right beside you."



Margot took a deep breath and steeled herself for what the cave might hold. She started up the incline toward the entrance, where candlelight flickered against the textured, rocky walls. The woman inside heard Margot approach and turned her head. Blue-white cataracts covered the irises of Kamen's eyes, and clumps of her long, dark hair revealed sore patches of scalp between them. A black dress covered her body from the base of her neck to the ankles of her boots, its sleeves hiding arms that Margot imagined were also scattered with raw wounds. Kamen stood perfectly still beside a rectangular wooden table in the middle of the cave, on which the candle rested. Behind her, Margot made out the shape of a trunk.

Kamen spoke in raspy, croaking sounds. "Who are you? You are not welcome here."

Margot formed each word deliberately to keep from stammering. "I'm sorry to intrude. My name is Margot, and I just want to ask you some questions. We brought you a present. We're not here to cause trouble." She held out the folded golden scarf.

Kamen squinted at Margot with unveiled cynicism. "Nothing is free."

"We only want to ask if you can help us. Even if you can't, you can keep it."

Kamen crept forward and lifted a section of the golden fabric into the sunlight that illuminated the cave's opening. "Why do you torture me with beautiful things? My days of beauty are long past."

Margot glanced at Jaden with hopelessness sitting in her stomach like a stone. "I need your help. I'm not from Evergren. I'm from another world. I believe a friend of mine who died here is trapped in the Netherwood, and his soul wants to go home."

"Leave me in peace. The Netherwood is my home, and I have been barred from returning."

"I think my friend is terrified. I don't know who else to go to."

"What do you expect from me? I cannot even die because my soul and rotting flesh have been bound to Saber. I will suffer for as long as he lives, and he is not a man easily killed."

"Do you have any connection to the Netherwood?" Margot's hands began to tremble, but she continued to hold out the golden scarf as an offering. "Is there any way you could communicate with Todd's soul?"

"Why should I help you? Why should I exhaust myself for a scarf Saber could have brought me?"

"Do your wounds hurt you, Kamen?" Determination belied the sympathy that smoothed Jaden's voice. "I know the best wise woman in the southern province. She could make a salve for you if that would make a better trade."

Margot stared into the cataracts that covered Kamen's eyes. "Please. You're the only person who can help us. Tell me what I can do."

Kamen lifted the golden scarf from Margot's hands and draped it around her fragile shoulders. "I want the salve tomorrow. Saber will bring me what I require for the ritual, and we will call for your friend's soul. I have no magic, but there are those watching over the Netherwood who owe me great favors."

"Thank you." Margot found herself bowing her head as she had seen other inhabitants of Evergren do.

Two slimy fingertips lifted Margot's chin, and she did not know how to describe the stench that entered her nostrils. She held her breath and gazed back into Kamen's eyes.

"You are not so different than us." Kamen withdrew her hand and moved deeper inside the cave.

Jaden nodded to Margot, and they took their leave.

~ o ~

Margot stared at her watch, willing the minute hand to shift. Dr. Moore's voice droned on, but the meaning of the words was lost to her. She closed her notebook and eased it into her backpack. Dr. Moore's eyes met her own with an expression of disapproval.

The bell rang, and Margot nearly ran out of class. She hurried down three flights of stairs and ducked into the vacant women's bathroom. Within moments, she stepped through the portal into Evergren. Margot gave up on trying to control her destination and raced across the clearing. She made her way through the woods and headed for the dwellings in the swamplands. Jaden and Sage stood talking near the pair of horses outside his hut. Margot panted heavily as she came to a stop.

Sage rested her hands on Margot's arm. "I finished the salve this morning. Please tell Kamen she is welcome to any service I can provide."

Margot hugged Sage tightly. "Thank you."

"We'd better get started." Jaden read the sky. "We don't know how long this will take, and we won't want to have to do most of our traveling in the dark. The roads can be dangerous."

Margot nodded and accepted Jaden's help in climbing up into the nearest saddle. He swung up onto the horse next to her and tugged the reins to begin their ride. They traveled to a medley of birdsong, cricket chirps, and the rhythmic *clop-clop* of horse hooves. They followed the fork in the road along the mountains and arrived at the base of the ascending slope to Kamen's cave. Jaden checked the tree alongside them for its unreadable symbols before dismounting and tying the horses to the trunk.

"It's so quiet," Margot whispered.

Jaden pulled a clay jar out of his saddle bag and handed it to Margot. He nodded toward the candlelight flickering across the ceiling of the cave. "Someone's home."

Margot took a deep breath and released it as she moved up the faint trail to the entrance of the cave. Kamen appeared to her left with Sage's golden scarf draped around her shoulders. She turned her sunken face toward the sound of Margot's galoshes and lowered the lid of the wooden trunk. A dark figure swept past Margot's right side.

When Margot recovered from her surprise, she turned to see the man rushing at Jaden. The knife in his hand glinted in the predusk sunlight. Jaden was still drawing his dagger when



the man in dark clothes collided with him. They fell hard to the ground and tumbled down the slope for several feet. Jaden regained his balance first and watched the other man closely. The dark-haired man in black stood up with athletic, precise movements. Margot examined the number of varying scars marring his tan, unshaven face. His pale eyes glared with hostility.

Jaden remained in his defensive stance. "Saber? We don't mean any harm. We have an agreement with Kamen."

"You should've come sooner. You kept her waiting. She thought you lied to her. I would've killed you both if she hadn't ordered me to have pity on you."

"It's my fault we're so late." Margot raised the clay jar in her hands. "We have the salve."

Kamen stood above them in the entrance to the cave, holding the shimmering scarf around the sleeves of her black dress. She blinked repeatedly to shield her clouded irises from the sun. "Then it is time."

With a distrustful glance, Saber sheathed his knife and preceded the visitors into the cave. Kamen set the salve aside on the lid of the wooden trunk. She placed her fingertips on the edge of the table in the middle of the cave. The candle stood at one end while a black glass bottle and a wooden stopper occupied the center. As Margot faced Kamen across the table, she studied the smooth, pear-shaped bottle. Saber moved behind her to the right, and Margot looked up at Jaden to her left.

"Close your eyes," Kamen instructed. "Focus on my voice, and I will call to his spirit. What is your friend's name?"

"Todd Gibson."

Kamen's eyelids closed, and Margot closed hers as well. She felt her other senses heighten in response. She breathed in the smoke of the candle and a sour smell mixed with sweet flowers. The table felt rough beneath the pads of her fingertips. Kamen's raspy voice descended



into a paced intonation. "Gods of power, gods of wisdom, gods of life and death. Grant us access to the Netherwood."

Margot did not move, almost afraid to breathe, transfixed by a commanding force behind Kamen's voice.

"Give me access to the souls of the Netherwood as one who has been there. You are indebted to me, gods of darkness. Release the soul of Todd Gibson into this vessel or I will reveal your true names."

Kamen's voice grew even more powerful. "Release Todd Gibson from the Netherwood. He does not belong to you. He is not of your world. Release Todd Gibson to me and this vessel as we command you. RELEASE TODD GIBSON FROM THE NETHERWOOD."

A short burst of cold air flashed across Margot's face, and she shuddered. She heard Kamen pound the stopper into the bottle and opened her eyes.

Kamen lifted the black glass bottle out to her. Her cataracts flashed opaque in the candlelight. "His soul is in your care now. Take him back to your own world and let his soul find its eternal peace."

Margot knew she was trembling but was not certain she could stop it. "I will."

~ o ~

Helen regarded her daughter with concern across the dining room table. Margot ate her meatloaf and mashed potatoes in spurts isolated by periods of thoughtful inactivity. She wanted to finish her dinner and attend to the black bottle, but she remained transfixed by the power behind Kamen's ritual. Helen set her fork down, the prongs clinking against the ceramic plate.

"Have you talked to Darin recently?"

"Not really." Margot looked up from her dinner. "We don't really talk anymore except about our history project."

"When do you have to give your presentation?"

"Monday."

“Are you ready?”

“I guess so.”

Helen reached out and rested her fingers across Margot's wrist. “You look tired.”

“I'm all right.”

“You seemed to like going back to the county museum after so many years. Why don't you try going back there if you need more material for your report? I thought that was a great idea.”

*It was Todd's idea*, Margot recalled. “Maybe I will.”

Helen nodded sympathetically. “Take it easy, honey. You don't have to finish your meatloaf if you're not hungry.”

Margot ate a few more bites before she cleaned up her plate and fork. She went upstairs to her bedroom and closed the door. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, she pulled the black glass bottle out of her backpack. Margot stared at the stopper before she removed it. A tiny, white wisp rose from the mouth of the bottle, and Margot sat in awe of it for a long time.

~ o ~

Margot approached the front doors of the museum with her sketchpad in hand, hoping to avoid Tyler while she put the finishing touches on her contribution to the project. She signed her name into the guestbook out of habit, and the curly-headed woman behind the counter looked her way.

“Can I help you?”

Margot took a step toward the long aisle in front of her. “I just came to look at the Victorian exhibit again.”

The woman smiled and nodded. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Margot made her way down the aisle past the colonial and revolutionary exhibits. Stopping in front of the Victorian sitting room, she opened her sketchpad on the glass display case next to her, the same surface on which Tyler had once set the small wooden box. Margot

took a pencil out of her coat pocket and began to sketch the mannequin standing in the middle of the exhibit. She barely finished outlining the broad brim of the hat and the ankle-length dress when Tyler appeared in her peripheral vision.

"Margot, I haven't seen you for a while. How are you?"

Margot looked Tyler straight in the eye to steady herself. "I'm holding up. I lost a friend recently; it's not easy to deal with."

"I'm sure it isn't. I'm sorry for your loss." Tyler touched Margot's arm, a gesture that struck her as gentle and compassionate. "I won't keep you. Let me know if there's anything you need."

"Is the exhibit accurate?" Margot turned back to the Victorian sitting room on the other side of the red velvet rope.

"As accurate as we could make it. I believe we have some books on the Victorian period if you would like me to bring them out for you."

"Do they have pictures? That's mostly what I'm interested in."

"I'll see what I can dig up for you."

Tyler retreated in the same direction from which he had come. Margot returned to her drawing and added the breakfront to the left edge of the page. Her shoulder muscles relaxed, and she assured herself she had no reason to be afraid of Tyler. Someone who had access to Evergren could surely supply her with the best sources for her research about England.

~ o ~

Helen was hanging up the phone in the kitchen when Margot wandered in. She wished she would have been able to hurry out the door without stopping to talk to her mother.

"I know you're busy, but could you help Grandma with her cleaning today? I have a lot of things I would love to get done around here."

"Sure." Margot's plan to go straight to Evergren withered, and she tried to hide her anxious energy. "I'll go right over."



During the drive across town, Margot challenged herself to invent the most efficient cleaning regimen possible. Her impatience to continue the mission for Teren made sitting still almost unbearable. She parked in the narrow driveway and snatched her purse from the passenger seat. Margot hurried up the cement pathway to the porch, and Grandma Marshall let her in without delay.

"Hi, sweetie. It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too, Grandma." Margot took off her coat and hung it in the closet. "What have you been up to?"

"Nothing much. I haven't been out of the house since the weather turned cold earlier in the week. I've been looking at old pictures. You should see the ones of your mother growing up with that mop of dark curls."

Margot laughed and followed Grandma Marshall through the living room. "I can look for a few minutes." She glanced around the neat, simple space and wished that she had inherited her grandmother's impeccable sense of organization. A vast arrangement of photographs awaited Margot on the dining room table. Flanked by flowered photo boxes and cream-colored albums, they contained still shots from decades of an active life. Grandma Marshall eased herself into the seat already pulled away from the table. Margot stood next to her, accepting photographs from her grandmother's wrinkled hand and bringing them closer to her eyes to examine them.

"Here's your mother at the beach. She would've been five years old. She's too busy playing in the sand to keep the sun out of her eyes. Here she is with your grandpa. If you want to go a little further back..." Grandma Marshall offered Margot the photograph of a young couple turned toward each other and beaming from ear to ear beneath a white banner decorated with the words **HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MARGARET**. "It was a very special birthday. Your grandfather proposed to me that day. You can tell by the scar I've already been in my accident. He said he was afraid of losing me again. My girl friend told everybody I had gotten into the accident on



purpose so I could get married faster, but she was just joking, you know. But it made my mother so furious.”

Margot laid the photograph down and stared at the one beside it on the table. She picked it up reluctantly, recognizing the face. “Who is this?”

“That’s me, maybe a year or two younger. I don’t have my scar yet.” Grandma Marshall drew the tip of her index finger across the forehead in the picture. “I have no idea who took that one. It’s pretty good, isn’t it? It almost looks professional.”

*It almost looks like the Betrayer.* Margot inhaled a shaky breath, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. “Do you mind if I borrow this and bring it back? Mom might like to look at it.”

“Of course. Take as many as you want. I’ve got plenty.”

~ o ~

Margot climbed the last dusty stair to the Teren records. Razuhl stepped aside to let her walk into the space, and she headed straight to the volumes they had reserved on the wooden table.

Razuhl looked around the room. “It would make our research considerably easier if the books were arranged in a particular order. I would organize them myself if I did not have more pressing business.”

Margot flipped through the pages in front of her until she brought her finger down on the drawing of the Betrayer. She slipped her grandmother’s photograph out of her pocket and held them side by side.

Razuhl noticed Margot’s intense expression. “Have you found something, Margot?”

“I think I know who the Betrayer is.”

Razuhl joined Margot on the other side of the table.

Margot kept her voice low despite her excitement. “My grandmother. Look at the resemblance.”

Razuhl felt the foreign gloss of the photograph's surface with his thumb. "You have so many strange possessions."

"It's like an exact drawing of my grandmother. After these two images were recorded, she had an accident that took away some of her memory and left a scar on her forehead." Margot looked up into Razuhl's solemn face. "My grandmother must've promised to help the village of Teren, gotten hold of the Key, and lost her memories of the quest when she got into the accident."

Razuhl sat down on the stool. "How would your grandmother have found her way to Evergren?"

"I don't know, and I'm sure she doesn't remember. If she had remembered Evergren, she would've come back to help them. I don't know anything that could keep her down."

"What about the Key? Do you believe she still has it?"

"It's possible. I hope so."

Razuhl looked over the open pages of the book on the table. "I'll double my efforts to find a description of the Key and its last known location. There has to be more information in one of these books."

Margot returned the photograph to her pocket for safekeeping. "This means there was no betrayal. My grandmother just never made her way back to tell them what had happened to her. She didn't mean to keep the Key."

"We'll set her reputation right, Margot. I'm sure Nimus will record our discovery in the books."

"But we still don't know who sabotaged your first trip here."

"That is precisely why. I will keep our findings a secret from High Mage Tarinok until we've learned everything we need to know."

Darin's booming voice filled the room with a casual cadence. The pale walls and tiled floor seemed to contain it for the class to hear. Dr. Moore took notes on the presentation from a desk in the back row. Darin pulled the white screen down over the chalkboard, and Margot switched on the overhead projector to display her sketches. Darin's witty comments sent chuckles through their audience, endearing him to Margot at the same time she realized their presentation might be the last thing they did together. Their friendship had faded since Todd's passing, and although Margot still cared about Darin, she knew they would drift their separate ways.

~ o ~

Margot tucked her hands into her coat pockets and trekked through the southern fields to the Mage School.

Ari greeted her with a gentle bow from the other side of the iron gate. "Good morning. Mage Razuhl is expecting you in his quarters." Ari unlatched the gate and let Margot into the courtyard. They walked up the path to the double doors, the great height of the pale grey tower leaving an impressive shadow across the school.

"Is it always this quiet here?" Margot asked.

"Most of the time. Speaking loudly is discouraged as so many of the mages require silence for reading and meditation. Our celebrations, on the other hand, are marked by music and laughter."

The two women entered the front hall and ascended the stairs. Ari knocked and left Margot outside Razuhl's door, where she did not have to wait for long. Razuhl motioned her toward his desk. The usual stack of books remained on the left edge of its wooden surface. In front of the chair lay a handwritten note on brown parchment.

"What's this?" Margot slid the chair back from the desk.

"The information we've been searching for. I spent the last several days in the Teren Overlook." Razuhl turned his back and let Margot read the page in front of her.

*Copied from the Teren Village Records.*

*The Key is not a conventional metal object. It is cut from a piece of veridite, the light green stone through which light may pass. For the Key to fulfill its purpose, light must pass through it in order to reveal the hidden location of the royal treasure troves. The Key must be placed in its base in the top of the tower of the Mage School. Only then will the sun's rays illuminate the door's secret location.*

Margot sought Razuhl out over her shoulder. "I know where the Key is. It's been sitting on my grandmother's desk as long as I can remember."

Razuhl's tone remained grim. "I'm grateful for some good news." He offered Margot a second note in his tall script. "I also discovered this."

Reluctantly, Margot accepted the page and read it carefully.

*Copied from the Teren Village Records.*

*Strange reports have come to us from the palace. Following the passing of Hessianon, King of the South, the court advisor sent for his niece to accept the throne. With the arrival of Jazhara, the advisor has been noted as missing without a trace. Nonetheless, Jazhara has been awarded the title Queen of the South and now sits upon the throne.*

"I consulted the library here at the School," Razuhl informed Margot. "Our records assure me the Key has been missing for quite some time."

"I don't understand."

"This may be evidence that Jazhara is not the rightful queen. Every possibility exists that she murdered Hessianon's niece and the advisor, perhaps the one person at the palace who could expose her. Jazhara is too shrewd a woman to seek power by itself; she must be after the Key and the location of the hidden royal treasure. She's been searching for it the same as we have. Your grandmother has had it in her possession since before Jazhara was born."

Margot felt too anxious to continue sitting at the desk and joined Razuhl in the middle of the room. "Would Jazhara have sabotaged your quest with Todd to keep you from finding the Key before she does?"



"Anything is possible." Razuhl lowered his voice considerably. "I suggest we take possession of the Key as soon as we can."

"I'm sure my grandmother would've wanted to use the royal treasure to feed the people of Teren, just like Todd did. Now that we know she was the Betrayer, I want to finish her quest, too."

"They would be eternally grateful for that. Do you know of anyone who might help us gain access to the treasure?"

"I have friends who might know someone. We've got to climb that tower."

"King Falthazar in the eastern mountains may have the power to help us, not only to supply food to Teren but to depose Jazhara. I cannot allow her to elude justice for all that she's done."

Margot pictured Todd lying peacefully on the cot in the otherwise empty room. "Neither can I."

~ o ~

Margot made her way through the swamps to the dwellings on the dry plateau. Sage laughed as she emerged from Jaden's hut. She approached Margot with happiness in her eyes.

"Marsala has returned to us. I thought I'd make some tea."

Margot walked alongside Sage into the wise woman's hut. "I wanted to ask Jaden a favor, but I don't want to bother him if Marsala is here."

"If I know Jaden, he'll be more upset if you don't bring it up." Sage opened several clay jars on her wooden shelves and collected a handful of dried leaves. "What do you need?"

"Razuhl and I have to break into a place that might be pretty hard to infiltrate. It's not something either of us knows anything about."

"I'm sure Jaden knows someone." Sage dropped the leaves into a small kettle and poured water over them. She led Margot back out into the starlight of evening.

Jaden and Marsala sat talking on two floor pillows. They looked up at the muffled sound of footsteps on dirt.

"Marsala, it's good to see you," Margot said, glad for Jaden's sake the caravan had circled back around along its unending route.

Marsala responded with a smooth bow of her head. "The swamps extend a hospitality to me not experienced elsewhere."

Sage set her tea kettle over the fire. "Jaden, Margot has a question."

"Do you know anyone who can help us break into the royal treasure troves?" The others stopped their movements, and Margot stared back into the three pairs of eyes fixed on her face. "Razuhl and I are working to find the location, but we'll need help getting in. We'll also need all the hands we can get to carry the treasure out. We're going to use it to buy food for Teren."

Jaden answered without hesitation. "You can count on me. With a little time, I can try to track down Arnessa Fortuli. She's one of the best treasure hunters I know of and an old friend of mine. They don't call her the Fortunate for nothing. I know she'll come through for us if she's in the area."

"Great. We're planning to make our move in about a week." Margot paused to ponder the gravity of her next statement. "We've also found evidence that Jazhara might not be the rightful queen."

"Strong evidence?"

"I hope so. I'm going to show it to Falthazar when I pay him a visit with the treasure we take. Razuhl seemed to think Falthazar might be able to end her rule."

"Something can really be done about it?" Jaden pulled his wooden box toward him, his pipe resting on top of it.

Sage wrapped her hand in a thick cloth and lifted the kettle off the fire. "That's the best news we've had in a long time."

Marsala's sultry voice rose up unexpectedly. "I can borrow mules from the caravan if they would be of assistance. They can carry any amount of treasure you need to move."

Margot studied Marsala's tanned, beautiful face. "Thank you. They would be a great help. I'll come by the swamps again as soon as I learn where the treasure is. Then we can figure out when to meet there to dig into it." Margot sat down on one of the floor pillows, sinking to eye level with Jaden and Marsala. "I know we don't know each other, Marsala, and I must seem young and inexperienced to you. But when I lost my friend Todd a few weeks ago, I realized how much we take for granted, whatever world we're living in. I guess I wanted to tell you that if you want to settle here in the swamps with people who love you, don't keep putting it off. You never know when that won't be an option anymore."

"I don't know how."

"We'll help you," Margot assured her, leaning forward. "We'll all help you. Stop punishing yourself because of what your village told you. Moles have never brought bad luck to anyone. If the caravan makes you happy, then you should stay with it, but if staying with Jaden would make you happier, this is where you belong."

Marsala kept her eyes averted, and Margot thought she saw the glint of a few tears gathering above Marsala's lower eyelids. "I need time to think about what you said." She smiled faintly. "But not too much time."

~ o ~

Helen parked the car in the driveway, and Margot braced herself against the cold Sunday afternoon. The two women stepped out into the breeze that stirred the maple and oak leaves around the cement beneath their feet. They hurried up to the porch where Helen rang the bell with a gloved finger.

Grandma Marshall opened the door with an expression of concern. "Come on inside. It's so cold today." She unlatched the storm door and held it open.

Margot pointed at the yard. "I'm going to rake up some of these leaves for you, Grandma."

"It's too cold, honey, come inside."

Helen slipped into the living room, but Margot started back down the steps to the front walk. "I'll be there in a minute. I'll just rake half of them and take a break to warm up."

Margot pulled the rake out of the back seat of the car and moved as quickly as she could to usher the fallen leaves toward the street. Bursts of shivers shook her despite her gloves, hat, and scarf. She ran to the door, leaned the rake against the house's peeling white paint, and let herself into the warmth of the living room. Her mother and grandmother's conversation carried in from the dining room, and she left her coat and gloves in the closet.

The second the pale green rock of veridite caught Margot's eye, she drifted toward it as if in a trance. She picked it up and wrapped her hands around its solid form. "Grandma? Where did you get this?"

"My paperweight? I think your mother gave it to me years ago."

Helen shook her head. "No, Mom, I never gave you that. You've had it as far back as I can remember."

Grandma Marshall ran her fingertip along the scar above her dark eyebrow. "I suppose I should know better than to rely on my memory. Why don't you take it, Margot, if you like it? I don't know where it came from, but you're welcome to it."

Margot paused before she answered in the interest of being polite. "Sure, Grandma. Thank you."

~ o ~

Razuhl unlocked the door to the base of the tower while Margot and Ari watched the hall for signs of activity. Margot wrapped her fingers loosely around the straps of her backpack where they arched over her shoulders. Razuhl pushed the door open, its gentle creaking catching



the attention of the two women. They stepped into the dark stairwell of the tower, and Razuhl stepped in behind them, pulling the door closed.

"This is our only chance," Razuhl informed them in a barely audible voice. "High Mage Tarinok has disappeared again on business, and we can't risk being discovered by trying a second time."

Ari gave a single nod of her bald head. "I'll let you know the moment I hear footsteps."

Razuhl began the ascent. Margot followed and slid her hand along the cool stone wall that curved to her right. She could feel the weight of the Key resting against her back, replacing the usual contents of her bag. The higher they climbed, the more light reached them, and at last Margot came into view of its source. Tall windows surrounded a room containing dark wooden furniture and plush purple linens. A large round table stood in the middle of the room, neatly stocked with blank paper, a quill pen, and an inkwell. Pale grey stones formed a ledge around the base of the room beneath the windows. Razuhl patted the back of Margot's shoulder and gestured to the other side of the round space. Rounding the table, Margot stared down at an irregularly shaped hole two inches deep in a block of stone fused to the top of the ledge.

"Is this the base?"

Razuhl glanced around the room. "It must be."

Margot lowered her backpack to the floor. She unzipped it and unwrapped a sweatshirt from around the Key. She rotated the piece of veridite until it settled comfortably into the stone base. Razuhl fetched a blank page and the quill pen from the table. He sat down beside the Key and peered alongside Margot down into the countryside. A patch of sunlight, colored green by the veridite through which it traveled, marked a small hill in a clearing to the north. Razuhl worked quickly to map out its location, glancing out the window as often as necessary to represent it accurately.

"I regret that I cannot accompany you to the treasure troves." Razuhl handed Margot the freshly constructed map. "If I am missed at the school, our entire plan may be jeopardized. I have faith you can complete it without my attendance."

Margot tried not to let her disappointment show. "You've been a great help. I never could've come this far without you."

"I hope we may meet again when the school is cleansed of its threats and you will be welcome here anytime."

"I hope so, too." Margot blew on the map before folding it into her pocket. She extracted the Key from its base and zipped it safely inside her backpack. Razuhl led Margot down the stairs into the darkness of the tower's landing, where Ari still waited. "We got it."

Ari smiled. "Best of luck to you at the troves."

Razuhl laid his hand lightly on Margot's shoulder. "Don't forget to show Falthazar the notes I gave you on Jazhara."

"I won't forget. We aren't the only ones who want to see her dragged from the throne, and I want to make sure she gets everything that she deserves."

~ o ~

Arnessa Fortuli stood with both hands on her hips as the midday sun shone on her face and threaded strands of gold through her honey-colored hair. Margot studied her serious, experienced demeanor with a touch of amusement. She did not hesitate to place all her faith in her companions, Jaden, Marsala, or Arnessa, whose brown eyes examined the small hill before them. Marsala held the reins of the two mules she had secured from the caravan, and Jaden lingered by her side. Arnessa circled the grass-covered mound at a short distance.

"Will you check our location one more time?"

Margot consulted the map and compass in her hands. She gauged their position relative to the mage's tower several miles behind her. "This is where the Key pointed the sunlight."

Arnessa walked slowly around the hill twice more and stopped on the northern side. She crouched down out of sight. "I think I found the door. I'm going to need some help getting it open."

Margot and Jaden joined Arnessa on the other side of the hill. Her hands rested on a thick branch that formed a discreet handle by curving in the middle away from the ground.

"It should lift out and up if I know this sort of entryway." Arnessa positioned herself on the left side of the door. "Grab hold and pull when I tell you to."

On Arnessa's count, Margot strained with all her strength. The three of them swung the door upside down and rested it against the hillside, exposing the stone slab to which the handle was affixed. A steep stone staircase led to a corridor in the ground, its spider webs glinting silver.

A smile spread across Arnessa's face, and she jogged over to where Marsala stood with the mules. Arnessa hurried back and handed Jaden a lantern while keeping one for herself. "Let's see what's down here."

Arnessa began the descent into the long-undisturbed corridor, and Jaden motioned Margot ahead of him. She winced at the stale smell of earth and stone, grateful that Arnessa brushed aside the sticky spider webs as she moved forward. The lanterns' unsteady light revealed stone beams in the walls and ceiling. Arnessa stopped at a door in front of them and bent down to study the lock.

Exhaling softly, Arnessa steadied herself on her haunches and drew a lock pick from a small leather pack at her hip. She held her ear close to the keyhole as she manipulated the thin metal pick. At last, an unseen mechanism gave a soft click, and Arnessa grinned up at the two watching over her shoulder. She stood up and opened the door before tucking the lock pick back into her leather pouch.

Margot stepped into the next room, an empty space offering more spider's webs and several closed doors. "There's nothing here."

"Not in this room." Arnessa lifted her lantern to illuminate the far corners of the underground room. "You never know what's behind the next door. Go ahead."

Margot approached the door in front of her and tested the handle. It swung open, and Jaden lifted his lantern high into the doorway. Crates, barrels, and trunks covered the floor except for a few thin paths. Clay and wooden busts displayed an array of jewelry in gold, silver, and bronze, a rainbow of gemstones sparkling in the flickering light.

"Will this feed your village?" Arnessa asked, her voice filled with appreciation for the extensive collection.

Margot's surprise left her nearly speechless. "Yes." She looked over the wealth Jazhara might have killed for and thought of the starving, wide-eyed people of Teren. "Let's grab whatever we can. Teren will need it. Keep something for yourselves, too."

Arnessa grinned widely. "I always take a souvenir."

~ o ~

Riding next to Jaden, Margot looked down the left-hand fork in the road as they passed it, the path that led to Kamen and Saber's cave.

Jaden's grey eyes examined a wrinkled map. "We're getting close."

The two horses and their riders began the slow ascent up the first slope between the green, tree-speckled peaks. Margot remembered that Jaden knew nothing about Falthazar except his reputation as a fair and honest ruler. The pair continued in silence until Falthazar's castle appeared to the right, nestled by tall cliffs on three sides. The brown stone structure presented a box-like, almost medieval style, with circular turrets.

"It's beautiful," Margot murmured.

The two riders stopped their horses several feet from the enormous wooden doors.

Margot looked up at the battlements decorating the circular towers at each corner of the castle. "Do we knock?"



A figure appeared in the window above the doors, wearing a cardinal red vest. The man's long, thin face was accentuated by goat's horns rising from his greying hair and a thick goatee adorning his chin. "Greetings, travelers. What brings you to the castle of King Falthazar the merciful?"

Margot's relief warmed her voice. "His mercy. We want to talk to the king about saving the village of Teren and another important matter."

"Very well. I shall come down and let you in. Long live the king!"

The goat man stepped away from the window. Margot and Jaden lowered themselves from their saddles onto the wide dirt road. Margot patted her horse's side near one of the bulging saddle bags strapped across its back. She reached her hand into the pocket of her jacket and felt for Razuhl's note and the piece of jewelry she had selected to present to Falthazar.

One of the tremendous wooden doors swung into the entrance hall, and the short goat man greeted them with a genteel bow. He led them the length of the hall on bent goat legs and passed through an arch into the throne room. On the dais five steps above the floor, Falthazar sat on a cushioned bench with a low back to accommodate his majestic, brown and white feathered wings. The falcon man's black eyes shone intelligently above a great, curved nose.

"Your visitors, my king," the goat man announced. He bowed to Falthazar and left the room to return to his post.

Falthazar regarded his guests with a regal nature that seemed to fill the vast hall.

"Welcome to my court. Considering the matter you have come to me about, I hope you have not traveled here in vain. The tribulations of Teren are well known throughout the land by now."

Margot drew the gold bracelet from her pocket, and the sapphires glinted in the light of candles and a departing sun. "Yes, your majesty, the village of Teren has been starving for over fifty years. We've worked hard to get a large amount of treasure we could offer you in trade for food. If it's possible, we'd like to save the people still living there. The rest of the treasure is with our horses." She displayed the bracelet on her flat palm.

Falthazar clapped his hands three times, and the echoing sounds attracted two goat men who had been watching from the shadows not far from the dais. He leaned toward them and said, "Assign guards to their horses. Report to me the size of our food stores and the conditions of the last harvest."

Nodding, the two goat men passed Margot and Jaden with an air of purpose. The striking of their hooves against the brown stone floor receded into the entrance hall.

Falthazar returned his attention to his guests. "You may keep the bracelet in your hand. I will do all that I can to help the starving village. My counselor advised me that you also have other business."

"Yes." Margot pulled Razuhl's note from her pocket and unfolded it carefully. "We have evidence that Jazhara is not the heir to the southern throne. She may have killed at least two people to get it."

"I wish to see the evidence."

Margot walked up to the dais and stopped on the fourth step. She held out the note and watched Falthazar read the account.

"Thank you. You have done Evergren a great service," Falthazar said, his black eyes intense. He clapped his hands, and another pair of goat men joined him on the dais. "Take this to the library and see if we have more evidence of Queen Jazhara's deception. Enlist all the aid you can for this most important task."

The two goat men bowed and left the room with Razuhl's note.

"If we have even the smallest piece of evidence to add to what you have brought me, I will remove Jazhara from her throne before the day is over and escort her here for questioning. No stone will be left unturned. There is no time to be lost in case she learns that she is being hunted. Will you accompany me?"

Margot was already answering, "Of course," when Jaden glanced at her. She met his gaze for a moment and hoped she had not made an inappropriate decision.

Jaden nodded to Falthazar. "We would be honored, sir."

~ O ~

Within two hours, Margot found herself riding at Jaden's side once more. They traveled in the midst of an urgent crowd descending the mountainside and moving toward the palace on the other side of the swamps. Falthazar created a tall, strong figure in a chariot driven by a goat man and pulled by a white alpaca. All around Margot, figures that were half human and half animal rode the backs of the woolly, mountain-dwelling creatures. Two falcon women flew above the group, directing them along the shortest route to Jazhara's palace.

Margot turned to Jaden. "Do you think Jazhara will recognize me?"

"She's not likely to forget you, especially since you were fortunate enough to escape her grasp. She'll hold a grudge against all of us even after she's passed into the Netherwood. I only met the Queen once, but I've lurked in her halls enough to know what sort of woman she is. She's vicious to everyone who won't give her what she wants, and she's too proud to admit she doesn't deserve the world. I'm willing to believe she personally committed the murders that gained her the throne. There is no warmth in her eyes."

Margot could easily picture Jaden hiding in Jazhara's throne room without her knowledge. The top of the palace loomed above the woods up ahead and returned Margot's thoughts to the task at hand. She swore she would not let Jazhara intimidate her this time.

"Guards!" one of the flying falcon women alerted from the air.

"Advance," Falthazar commanded.

Several crocodile-headed guards emerged from the trees, dressed in long purple robes and brandishing their long spears. Falthazar and his group slowed to a stop.

"Step aside." Falthazar readjusted his great brown and white wings, making him seem larger than he was. "We seek an audience with the one who calls herself the queen of the south."

One of the guards hissed through sharp teeth and jabbed his spear forward with a menacing grimace. "Queen Jazhara does not welcome you."

"Escort us to the throne or my mages will deal with you as they see fit."

The two falcon women circled overhead and landed near Falthazar's chariot, positioning their clawed hands in front of them. The crocodile guards snapped their jaws at the falcon women but turned and began to lead the group into the woods.

"Do you think anyone will get hurt?" Margot asked Jaden under her breath.

"I don't know."

Margot and Jaden's horses emerged into the clearing. The palace's white stone walls, balconies, and flowering plants did not amaze Margot as they once had. She saw them as lures for a sinister house of cold shadows, at least while Jazhara occupied its throne. The crocodile guards motioned to another small band patrolling the clearing. Alaric walked with them; Margot recognized him by the shining medals adorning his robe. She turned her face aside and pulled the hood of her jacket over her head to avoid his notice.

Alaric led the entire procession to the large iron gate on the other side of the palace. Two more guards flanked the gate, and they stared distrustfully at the approaching mass of bodies.

"Open the gate," Alaric demanded.

The guards swung the gates open into the courtyard. Alaric addressed the waiting crowd over his shoulder. "Leave your beasts and chariots here."

Margot dismounted her horse, making sure Jaden remained by her side. She checked the position of Falthazar not far up ahead. She began to walk with the others, passing through the gigantic gate. Beneath Margot's feet, the stone path cut across the grass to the dark wooden doors of the palace halls. She entered the cavernous throne room, and the long purple rug muffled her footsteps.

At the far end of the room, the raven-haired queen straightened her posture, her jeweled hands gripping the arms of the throne. "Alaric, explain this intrusion or I will mount your head at the front gate."

"My queen, King Falthazar—"



"I can see him." A blue vein ran up the side of Jazhara's neck, and she stared down at the falcon man before her. "What is your business in my court?"

"I have received evidence that you gained the southern province through murder rather than through birth. We are here to remove you from the throne." Falthazar's wings expanded slightly. "I will give you a trial in my court to decide your fate."

The tigress twins stalked up to the throne on all fours, their golden eyes narrowed above bared white teeth. Alaric and his guards aimed the tips of their decorated spears at the crowd and awaited orders.

Jazhara raised her chin. "You know nothing. This is my throne. I suggest you return to yours."

"I intend to, with you as a member of my party."

"I have strong allies, Falthazar." Jazhara pushed herself to her feet between the two tigresses. "You are a fool to underestimate me."

A dark-haired man in black robes strode into the room from the right side of the dais. Margot stared at him for several moments before she realized she had stopped breathing. At last, she placed his face in her mind's eye, the man she knew as Tyler Jones.

Jazhara threw him a long glance. "High Mage Tarinok, the king of the east believes he has power here."

Tarinok grinned with malice and ascended the steps of the dais to stand beside Jazhara. Margot seethed as she stared up at him, anger constricting her chest and filling her head to an uncomfortable pressure.

"Go home," Jazhara commanded Falthazar, "or you may not live to see it again. Your measly band is no challenge for us."

Margot remembered Tyler saying he had never met Jazhara. She heard Tyler's voice in the library on the day they met and later asking about her family in the office of the county

museum. Margot squeezed through the crowd, taking one step past Falthazar himself. "You son of a bitch!"

Jazhara flinched at the unexpected tirade and shifted her focus away from Falthazar. Tarinok met Margot's gaze with an eerie stare. A thick silence passed between them.

"You lied to me!" Heat flushed Margot's face, and her ears felt like they were burning. She pulled the hood of her jacket off her head. "You set me up. You gave me that coin hoping I would be captured. You've been conspiring with Jazhara for years."

Falthazar looked down at Margot. "What has this man done?"

"He sabotaged Mage School research, letting my friend be killed and leaving the people of Teren to starve so they could find the treasure for themselves."

Jazhara's blue eyes pierced Tarinok. "She's been in Evergren the entire time?"

"I assure you, from what she said, I would've sworn I was telling the truth."

Jazhara glared at Margot. "If I ever find out who helped you gain this information, he will not live long."

Falthazar extended his arm in front of Margot and kept his eyes on the queen. "You are in no position to make threats. Come with us peaceably, or we will drag you from your palace by force. Your illegitimate rule is over."

Jazhara's order was barely audible. "Kill him."

The twin tigresses pounced forward off the dais with bloodlust in their eyes. Falthazar leapt into the air, his wings carrying him out of range. Margot backed away as Jaden rushed to protect her. The falcon women raised their palms toward Tarinok and encapsulated him in a pearly, white-pink light. All around Margot, Falthazar's subjects held the crocodile guards at bay with their shields.

Falthazar landed on his feet on the dais steps and moved toward Jazhara. "Surrender now, or we will force you to surrender after we have won the battle. I suggest you recognize my warriors for what they are before you wager the lives of those who serve you."

Jazhara clenched her jaw, throwing a fierce glance of disapproval at Tarinok. "Stand down."

The twin tigresses sat on their haunches, their tails twitching. Alaric and his guards hesitated.

"I said stand down, General."

The crocodile men rested the ends of their spears on the stone floor. Resentful sneers revealed their sharp teeth.

"You have made a wise decision." Falthazar raised his voice for all his subjects to hear. "Escort the queen and the high mage to one of the chariots. Do not take your eyes off them for a moment."

Several goat men approached the dais and gestured for Jazhara to come with them. She gave Falthazar one last look of pure, liquid hatred and walked proudly down to the floor. The goat men followed her at a close but respectful distance. When Jazhara slowed down, they almost bumped into her. Her eyes narrowed accusingly at Jaden.

"You." Jazhara's thin, black eyebrows tensed toward one another. "You helped her escape, didn't you?"

The goat men encircled Jazhara and ushered her through the doors in the back of the throne room. Margot stared after her, listening to the queen's objections echo off the room's white stones.

"Margot." She turned her head to face Tarinok, her rage shielding her against anything he might have to say. The two falcon women flanked him. "Were we right? Is the Betrayer related to you?"

Using all of her resolve to keep from attacking him, Margot held Tarinok's gaze defiantly. "You knew the Betrayer's real name, didn't you? That's why you picked me. You wanted to use me to get to her."

The falcon women began to lead Tarinok down the purple rug past Margot and the rest of the crowd.

Margot watched the retreating dark figure encased in pale light. "In case you ever see the light of day again, here's some advice," she called after him. "If you have to choose, don't kill the super smart, good-hearted guy. Kill the girl who fights back when she gets hurt. It'll save you a lot of trouble."

~ o ~

Darin was already halfway down the hall by the time Margot walked out the classroom door. She forced her way through the mass of other students leaving Dr. Moore's lecture and tried to catch up.

"Darin."

He turned and waited for Margot with an expression of discomfort. "How come you were late to class?"

"I slept through my alarm. I had a lot going on yesterday." Margot moved to one side of the hall where she and Darin could talk. "I just wanted to tell you that we found out who was behind Todd's death."

Darin leaned down to keep their conversation private.

"The guy we met in the school library might work at the museum, but he was born in Evergren. He was working with Jazhara to find access to the royal treasure. They wanted the Accursed to keep Todd and Razuhl from finding out that Jazhara wasn't the heir to the throne. The king of the eastern mountains arrested them and is holding them in his castle."

"Holding them for what?"

"Murder, conspiracy. I'm not sure what their punishment is going to be, but I'm sure it will be a good one. Falthazar's not very pleased about any of it." Margot exhaled and thought about happier endings. "Jaden's girlfriend Marsala is taking my advice and giving up the caravan to stay in the swamps. Since Tarinok's been removed from the Mage School, Razuhl



said I can hang out there whenever I want. Ari asked me to be the guest of honor at their next celebration.”

Darin shook his head slowly. “You really like it there.”

“I do.” Margot let a smile twist her lips and brighten her face. “I don’t know who’s going to take the throne, but they’ve got to be better than Jazhara.”

“I’m glad everything worked out for you. Thanks for letting me know. Take care.”

Darin shifted his backpack between his thick shoulders and took a few steps away from the wall.

Margot swung her backpack around to the front of her body and unzipped the smallest compartment. “I have something for you.” She handed Darin a small velvet pouch. “You take care, too.”

Darin weighed the contents of the pouch in his hand. “What is it? It feels like a medallion or a pendant or something.”

“It is. I wouldn’t hold it up in the middle of the hallway if I were you, but I doubt anyone would suspect it’s real gold. I hope you like it.”

Margot walked away toward the stairwell. Darin’s booming exclamation at his share of the royal treasure filled the hallway, and she smiled to herself.

~ o ~

The stillness made the chill in the air more bearable as Margot hurried from her car to the porch. She knocked harder than she meant to, and Grandma Marshall opened the door faster than Margot expected.

“Not even the weatherman thought it’d get this cold.” Grandma Marshall held the storm door open for Margot. “I’m glad you have the sense to wear gloves and a hat. I don’t know how so many young people go out in this weather without them.”

Grandma Marshall continued to speak, but Margot was not listening. She passed through the doorway, a portal between the yard and the living room, and studied her grandmother’s face. Margot pictured her half a century before, walking the dusty roads of Teren. A dark-haired

young woman named Margaret McKean had looked into the eyes of Teren's starving residents and promised them hope. Margot did not see a woman with white and silver hair, scarred above her eyebrow. She saw courage, magic, and eternal youth.

"Are you feeling okay, honey?" Grandma Marshall reached out and touched the back of her hand to Margot's forehead. "Or are you just deep in thought?"

A smile stretched across Margot's face. "I'm all right."

"Did you find a place for the paper weight I gave you?"

"I put it on my desk." *I wish you could've been with us in the Mage Tower*, Margot thought, recalling the way the veridite had glowed as the sunlight pierced it.

Grandma Marshall moved further into the living room. Margot removed her hat, gloves, and coat, storing them in the closet. She stopped by the coffee table on the way to the kitchen. The bottom half of the newspaper's front page read **Museum Curator Vanishes: No Clues in Local Man's Disappearance**. Margot stepped onto the kitchen tile and gently ushered her grandmother away from the cabinets beneath the sink.

"I'll get the supplies out, Grandma. Make yourself comfortable."

"You're so good to me, Margot. Thank you for all your help."

Margot shrugged and crouched down in front of the open cabinet. "It's no more than you would've done at my age." She hoped she had not said too much.

Grandma Marshall laughed. "Even I can't tell you that, honey."

Margot smiled and pulled the thinning roll of paper towels out of the shadows. Cleaning the house felt like repaying Teren's overdue gratitude.

Vita

Cassandra Zurawski  
Indiana University South Bend

Education

**Master of Arts**

English, Indiana University South Bend, South Bend, IN. May 2007.

**Bachelor of Arts**

Liberal Studies, Purdue University North Central, Westville, IN. December 2004.

